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IN ANOTHER INSTANT HEADLIGHT HARRY WAS PERCHED UPON THE VERY POINT OF THE PROJECTING COW-CATCHER.

OR,
**THE RAILROAD PARDS
IN FORTUNE CITY.**

BY COL. A. F. HOLT,
AUTHOR OF "HEADLIGHT HARRY" NOVELS,
"BLACK BUCKSKIN," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.
THE RESCUE.

"Look, Rufe—look! What's that on the track ahead? Good Heaven!—a man, sure's I'm alive! And he's lying half across the rails!"
"A fact, as sure as your name is Harry Hilton!" was the answer.
Amid the clash and clatter of the rushing loco-



motive, as, with a tremendous puffing and snorting, it toiled like some panting monster over the heavy grade, the excited voice of the speaker rung suddenly out; and the stalwart fireman, at that moment busily engaged in stirring the seething fires that raged within the heart of the iron giant, paused abruptly in his occupation and cast an anxious glance through the narrow window in front. Instantly his dust-stained face turned pale, for it required but that one swift glance to demonstrate the truth of the engineer's startling announcement.

Swinging abruptly round a sharp curve, a long straight stretch of track now lay before them, and the object that claimed Harry Hilton's—Headlight Harry as he was known to his comrades—attention was several hundred yards distant; yet it was plainly recognizable as a human form, lying close along the rail, but with head and one arm and shoulders extending over the rail.

Even as the quick eye of the vigilant engineer perceived this threatening peril, his ready hand and brain were working to avert it. One short, sharp whistle for "breaks!" fiercely smote the air, while almost simultaneously steam was shut off and the engine reversed. Then, hastily ordering his fireman to take care of the machine, Headlight Harry glided through the narrow opening in front of the cab.

He was prompt to realize that his train, though rapidly losing speed, could not be brought to a standstill in time to prevent the threatened horror. Despite this fact, however, he was determined to save the life of the unfortunate victim if, indeed, he were still alive, or at least save the body from frightful mutilation should the contrary prove to be the case.

With the agility of a squirrel he darted along the narrow running-board, clinging to the hand-rail as he went. The cylinder-box afforded the next convenient foothold; and thence by a nimble swing he was enabled to reach the pilot.

Within the swaying cab, Rufe Ruffle watched with breathless interest the movements of his gallant comrade. It was easy to divine the latter's purpose—but, would he be in time?

Had the train been running at full speed when the discovery was made, Harry's bold plan of rescue would have been wholly impracticable; but, fortunately, they had just pulled out of a station, and, with an adverse grade to overcome, had not attained the full rate of speed. And now, thanks to the prompt act of its masters, the powerful machine was losing momentum at every revolution of its resistless driving-wheels.

Nevertheless, the space that intervened between the on-rushing engine and its intended victim was dwindling with appalling rapidity, and Headlight Harry was not a moment too soon in reaching a point of vantage, though scarcely ten seconds had elapsed from the time when he sighted the man on the track until he stood upon the swaying pilot, ready to make the effort to snatch the unknown from the very jaws of death.

In another instant Headlight Harry was perched upon the very point of the projecting cow-catcher, clinging to the heavy coupling-bar with one hand, while with the other he reached eagerly out to clutch the apparently lifeless being who lay half-across the rail, his upturned face gleaming ghastly white in the fading sunlight.

The iron monster still forged ahead, and now was literally upon its victim, the projecting iron of the cow-catcher fairly grazing his limbs; but, ere the truck wheels could perform their cruel work, Headlight Harry's powerful hand gripped the waist of the unknown, and in an instant the senseless form was lifted from the track.

The intrepid engineer clung to his prize with the tenacity of a death grip; and, exerting a strength that seemed fairly superhuman, he drew the body steadily toward him until it found a partial resting-place against the slanting side of the cow-catcher.

In this precarious position, to maintain which taxed to the utmost every nerve and sinew, Harry Hilton waited impatiently through moments that seemed like hours, until the great wheels of the iron horse ceased to revolve, and he was permitted to leave his uncomfortable perch.

Scarcely had the train reached a standstill when the conductor and train hands, together with a goodly number of passengers, all eager for an explanation of this sudden interruption, hastened to the spot where the engineer was bending over the still senseless form of the rescued man. It was easy for the dullest mind to comprehend what had just transpired, and instantly there went up a cheer, for the gallant young knight of the lever who had dared so much to save a fellow-being.

Quite heedless, however, of this outburst, the young engineer was eagerly examining the unfortunate stranger. He saw before him a man of patriarchal appearance, apparently on the wintry side of sixty, with long hair and beard of silvery whiteness, and clad in garments of coarse homespun much the worse for wear. Considerably below the medium in stature, spare and attenuated, it was to the favorable condition of slight weight that Headlight Harry's success was, perhaps, largely due for it was quite improbable that he could have lifted and held at arm's-length a man of even ordinary size and weight.

Though the pallid face of the unknown was seemingly that of the dead, the engineer was not altogether disappointed as he searched anxiously for some sign of life. The heart was throbbing, though very faintly, and this slight pulsation inspired the brave engineer with hope that consciousness might be restored.

Meantime, from the eager throng came excited questions and remarks.

"Who is he?"

"Is he dead or alive?"

"How came he on the track?"

"Did he have a fit; or was there too much of a jag on?"

"Yes, the poor fellow still lives, though he may not recover consciousness," declared Headlight Harry; "and as for the cause of his misfortune, I think this will convince you that it is no accident, but the result of the most dastardly foul play!"

So speaking, he pushed back the silver locks, and all could see the dull red mark that showed with startling distinctness upon the ghastly brow of the stranger.

"Great heavens! The man has been sand-bagged!" cried Conductor Moore, aghast.

"Yes; knocked in the head like a dog. And, not content with that, the dastards must needs complete their fiend's work by leaving their poor victim here between the rails, to be ground to a shapeless mass by the first passing train. Oh, I would give a year of my life to have the authors of this outrage here at this minute, and enjoy the privilege of choking them to death from the nearest limb."

The young engineer's impassioned utterance, his firm-set face and fiercely-gleaming eyes all formed an unerring index to the red-hot indignation that burned within his breast.

Rising to his feet he faced the assembled crowd, and as those present looked for the first time squarely upon the engineer's face, he was met on all sides by surprised and inquiring glances, while exclamations of astonishment were heard on every hand.

"What's the matter, gentlemen? You stare at me as if I was a first-class dime museum freak. Is there anything particularly remarkable about my personal appearance?" Headlight Harry sharply demanded.

"Well, I sh'd say thar wuz, pard," promptly returned Rufe Ruffle, than whom no one seemed more amazed. "What's that spot on yer forehead, jest over yer left temple?"

Mechanically, the young engineer put his hand to the spot indicated, then withdrew the member to find it streaked with blood.

"Blood! How came it there?" he ejaculated, not until that instant becoming aware that he was injured.

All eyes were centered now upon the young engine-driver; and Rufe Ruffle, after a moment's eager scrutiny of the bloody furrow that marked his comrade's brow, fairly shouted in excitement:

"Great howlin' jackals! Why, pard, ye have be'n creased by a bullet!"

For an instant Headlight Harry stood in mute bewilderment; then, like a flash, the whole truth was revealed to him.

"Strange though it may seem, I believe you are right, Rufe," he exclaimed. "I heard no pistol-shot, yet the grind of wheels and hissing of escaping steam might easily have drowned the noise of that; while, as for the slight pain caused by the scratch, I was too much excited to notice it until now."

"But, who can have fired the shot, Harry?" queried Conductor Moore.

"Who? Who, indeed, but the same scoundrels who placed this poor fellow upon the track! Doubtless they were crouching in yonder thicket, awaiting the result of their diabolical deed, and, seeing me upon the pilot, divined my intentions and sought to frustrate them by drawing a bead upon my head. Fortunately, I got off with a mere scratch, though it was a mighty close call, as you may see."

The theory advanced by Harry seemed to all quite plausible.

"Then, if that's the case, the durned skunks can't be far off—probably hidin' at this minnit in yonder woods. Le's run the pesky varmints to earth, an' give 'em a taste of hemp," cried Rufe Ruffle, fairly bubbling over with righteous indignation.

His suggestion was greeted by a wild cheer from the assembled passengers and trainmen, the former by this time being on the scene in full force.

Deadly weapons leaped suddenly into sight, gleaming wickedly in the hands of a score of resolute men, as they followed the plucky fireman into the forest, entering upon the search with a spirit and determination that boded no good to the unknown offenders.

The latter, however, were not to be caught. Evidently they had fled at the first sign of danger, for not a trace of them was to be found anywhere; and, after a thorough search through the dense thickets that lined the track on either side in the immediate vicinity, the exasperated man-hunters were forced to abandon the quest and return empty-handed.

Meanwhile, the luckless victim of these inhuman ghouls had been taken aboard the train, and every available means employed to restore him to consciousness, but without success. Nothing remained, therefore, but to hurry him on to Richville, that being the nearest point where proper medical attention could be procured.

The train was accordingly put in motion again, as soon as the last enthusiastic man-hunter could be recalled; and, as they whirled merrily over the rails, the passengers found time to discuss at their leisure the singular events that had caused so startling an interruption to their journey.

As for Engineer Harry, he climbed into his cab, unheeding the flood of congratulations that poured in upon him, and went about his duties as though nothing unusual had happened—the cool, reliable engine-driver—and, as he lightly mounted to his seat, it was without a thought of his own narrow escape from the secret assassin.

But, as he urged on his iron steed at a tremendous pace, in the effort to regain lost time, it was to see constantly before him the haggard face and silvery hair of the mysterious old man whom he had rescued. The sad predicament of the latter had excited far more than ordinary interest and sympathy in the engineer's breast, and he of all others was anxious for the stranger's recovery, for he felt that a story of uncommon interest might be told in connection with this remarkable affair.

The run to Richville was completed without further incident; and, immediately upon arrival at that place, the mysterious unknown was hurried to the public hospital, there to receive the careful nursing for which that excellent institution was noted.

But, despite the efforts of the hospital staff, the old man continued throughout the night in the same comatose condition. Though life was still discernible in that feeble frame, it was but a faintly smoldering spark, that obstinately refused to be stimulated into flame.

Meantime, no one could be found to recognize the unfortunate; neither was there anything upon his person that would lead to identification. And so the curious public, left without other means of solving the mystery, was forced to impatiently await the recovery of the stranger so miraculously snatched from death by plucky Harry Hilton.

CHAPTER II.

THE OLD MINER.

As Headlight Harry stepped down from his engine at the Richville Station, on the evening of the day following that which had witnessed the stirring events just related, an envelope was thrust into his hand by a messenger who had for some moments impatiently awaited his arrival.

"From the hospital, sir; an' very important," said the youth, and hastened away, leaving the engineer to regard the missive in mingled surprise and curiosity.

Tearing open the envelope, which was addressed simply to "Harry Hilton, Engineer," he found its contents to comprise but a few lines, written in the same straggling, almost illegible hand that characterized the superstitious note:

"Come to me at once. Delay not, I am in a bad way, and have something of the utmost importance to communicate. Remember the opportunity is lost if you ignore this request. So make haste!"

"(Signed)

"THE MAN WHOSE LIFE YOU SAVED."

Needless to say Harry Hilton was surprised

to receive this communication, couched as it was in brief but forcible language that seemed to leave no doubt of its sincerity.

He had felt an extraordinary interest in the welfare of this unfortunate old man, even taking pains to call at the hospital before leaving town that morning for the purpose of ascertaining his condition, being informed at that time that the patient still lay insensible. Yet, he had not anticipated that this feeling would prove so warily reciprocal as the language of the stranger would seem to indicate.

He read the note to his bosom friend and confidant, Rufe Ruffle, and the face of that wide-awake young man betrayed his astonishment.

"Jiminy! You're in clover now, pard, sure enuff. That little act o' yours last night has made your fortune. It's dollars to doughnuts that old duffer is a second Jay Gould in disguise, an' wants to make you his sole heir as a reward for saving his life. So trot out your seven-league boots, pard, an' just hump yourself toward the horspittle, for, if the old chap croaks afore you git there, the chances 'll be lost. Come, git a move on, old man! You hear me?"

Headlight Harry could scarcely refrain from laughing at the sudden burst of enthusiasm displayed by his comrade.

"You are gifted with a very fertile imagination, Rufe," he exclaimed. "I fear, however, your predictions are too extravagant to become verified. Doubtless the poor old fellow merely desires to personally express his thanks for what services I chanced to render, in which case it would be a shame not to accord him the privilege. So, I am off for the hospital at once."

"Good luck to ye, pard! An' don't feel too proud to recognize your old chum when ye come struttin' back a millionaire," was Rufe's parting salutation, as the engineer hastened away.

Despite his own assumed indifference, Headlight Harry was not a little impatient to hear what the mysterious stranger wished to communicate. Something within him seemed to whisper that the coming interview was destined to be fraught with far more than ordinary importance. It was barely possible that Rufe Ruffle's idle prediction might not, after all, be entirely devoid of truth.

On arrival at the hospital, Headlight Harry had but to state his name to gain ready admittance.

"The patient is expecting you. Indeed, he has been inquiring for you almost continually ever since he regained consciousness several hours ago," explained the talkative attendant, as he led the way through a labyrinth of halls and corridors to a quiet apartment in the rear.

Into this room, which was remote from the main ward and used only for special cases, the engineer was ushered. He could dimly distinguish the form of the patient, propped up in bed at the further end of the darkened room, with an attentive nurse sitting near in readiness to administer to his wants. The latter promptly withdrew, however, as Headlight Harry entered, and he was left alone with the mysterious stranger.

With a feeling somewhat akin to awe, the young railroader softly approached the bed, and looked down upon that wan, pinched face, scarcely to be distinguished from the pillow that it pressed, such was its ghostly whiteness. As he stood there in silence, it was to become aware that the glittering black eyes of the unknown were fixed upon him in a steady, searching gaze that seemed to penetrate his very soul.

"Well, my friend," softly began Headlight Harry, after waiting for several moments in vain for the old man to speak, and growing impatient under that piercing scrutiny; "I am here, at last, in response to your message. In what way can I serve you?"

Still maintaining that eager scrutiny, it was some moments ere the unknown vouchsafed a reply; and when at length he did speak, it was in tones that, despite their weakness, were peculiarly harsh and rasping.

"So, then, you are Harry Hilton, engineer, commonly known as Headlight Harry?"

"Yes; that is my name, sir."

"And the man, if I am rightly informed, to whose prompt and courageous efforts I am indebted for my life?"

"No doubt your information is quite correct, since, I am happy to say, I was permitted to figure quite prominently in your rescue," returned the young engineer, with pardonable

no doubt, fact that in the man who preserved my life!" and his thin, nerveless fingers convulsively clutched the strong palm of the railroader. "Ah! It is a pleasure to clasp such a hand, so full of life

and strength—a hero's hand, ever ready to aid the weak and oppressed! Harry Hilton, it needs no knowledge of your past to determine your character; I can feel it in the cordial grasp of your hand,—I can read it in your face as from a written page; I can see before me a man of intelligence, the personification of health and strength; a man naturally modest and unassuming, yet, withal, bold as a lion when occasion demands—a man of sterling integrity, to whom I would not for an instant hesitate to intrust my all."

A faint flush suffused the young engineer's bronzed cheek, as these flattering words fell rapidly from the old man's lips.

"You are very complimentary, I'll allow," he laughed. "You give me credit for more good qualities than I ever before suspected myself of possessing. Are you sure you have made a correct diagnosis of my case?"

"Believe me, young man, I never make mistakes in character reading. A man's face is an infallible index to his soul; and it requires but a glance at that frank, noble countenance to demonstrate all that I have claimed, and more. Ah! It is, indeed, refreshing to meet such a man, after a lifetime's experience with the knaves and cut-throats with which this God-forsaken land abounds."

There was a momentary pause, during which the unknown never removed those keen, penetrating orbs from the engineer's face: then he continued:

"And so, Headlight Harry, you have come in answer to my message? Ha, ha! I knew you would not ignore the summons. I was careful to couch my request in words well calculated to excite your curiosity; and your presence here at this moment indicates that my efforts were successful."

"They were, indeed," admitted Harry, frankly. "From the tenor of the message, I inferred that you had some very urgent reason for desiring an interview. So, here I am, ready and anxious to serve you to the best of my ability."

"At present, then, you can serve me best by simply listening to what I am about to say. That, I fancy, will not prove a very irksome task," the old man chuckled.

"Let me assure you, as a starter, that I have not sought this interview, as you may have supposed, merely for the purpose of thanking you for your efforts in my behalf. Words are inadequate to express my gratitude; therefore, it would be a waste of time and energy to attempt it. No! I propose to show my appreciation in a far more substantial manner; and when you leave this room, young man, it will be to feel richly repaid for the trouble you have taken to visit me."

"Before coming down to business, it will be necessary to make quite a lengthy explanation, so, kindly give me your attention. First, however, lock that door; then draw as near as possible, for what I have to say is for your information alone, and you know the old adage that 'even the walls have ears.' Are you sure that we are alone in this room?" and the old man glanced nervously from side to side, as if imagining every harmless shadow to conceal a hostile form.

"Oh, yes; I am confident there are no eavesdroppers near, so you need have no apprehensions on that account," Headlight Harry assured him, after a searching glance around the darkened room. Then, after fastening the door, he drew a chair close to the stranger's bedside, and signified his readiness to listen.

There was a brief pause, during which the old man seemed to be summoning all his energies for the effort; then began what was to prove a most strange and interesting revelation.

CHAPTER III.

THE MINER'S REVELATION.

"WELL, my young friend, I am, as you have doubtless conjectured, a man with a history—an exceedingly interesting one, too, I can assure you; and, if all my innumerable adventures and mishaps could be put into print, I fancy they would make a good-sized volume. Gideon Goff is the name by which I was christened; but I have wandered so long in the wilderness, and sported so many wild-west 'handles,' that I sometimes wonder how I have managed to remember it through all these long, long years. I first saw the light of day in a quaint old farmhouse away down-East. Would to God that I had been content to always remain in that quiet rural home! I would probably have been living happily to-day, instead of lying here a disappointed, world-hating old wretch, broken completely in health and spirits, and only wait-

ing for the grim reaper to come and relieve my misery.

"But, no! To one of my wild and roving nature the humdrum life of the farmer was intolerable; so at an early age I cut loose from the old folks and started out, filled with all the rosyate hopes of youth, to see the world in its illimitable greatness. It was just at that time that the California gold-fever broke out, and I was in the van of that vast horde of prospectors who swarmed over the Golden State in that memorable year of '49. Once a full-fledged gold-seeker, there was no return to civilization for me; so, for the last forty years, the wild, nomadic existence of the prospector has been mine. And during that time, scarcely a spot from the Sierras to the Rockies—from British Columbia to Mexico—that my weary feet have not trod; hardly a gulch or hillside where I have not sought persistently for the golden dross to which all men are slaves.

"But I have no time at present to dwell upon those memorable days, fraught though they were with adventures innumerable. I must hurry on to events that have closer relation to the subject of my narrative. It was about one year ago that my peregrinations led me into a small mining settlement among the Colorado mountains, bearing the euphonious name of Satan's Camp. Be assured the appellation was a most appropriate one, for, while I have visited some pretty tough towns in my time, I am convinced there is no place in the entire West that, for general cussedness, can compare with this same Satan's Camp. A veritable hot-bed of vice and crime—every other building a saloon or gambling-den! Fully nine-tenths of the population comprise thieves, bummers, sharpers—ruffians and criminals of every description, whose principal occupations are drinking, gambling and fighting—sleeping by day, and turning night into a perfect Pandemonium with their drunken revelry. The hardy miners, who toiled in the neighboring valley, comprised the only decent element; and, as these foolish fellows habitually came into camp at nightfall to squander their earnings in gambling and drink, it was chiefly upon their hard-earned gold that the horde of rumsellers and sharpers thrived.

"With my years of experience as a prospector, I was enabled to see what I believed to be conclusive evidence of vast mineral wealth in the near vicinity of Satan's Camp; and it was this, alone, that tempted me to tarry in such a disreputable locality. I disdained to mingle with the local miners, toiling incessantly in the gulches, quite contented with a few ounces per day. I was looking for larger game—and at last I found it! It was my custom to spend days at a time prospecting among the neighboring hills; and upon one of these solitary excursions I struck it rich. Slowly making my way through a deep and narrow ravine, I suddenly came upon a spot where evidently an enormous bowlder had been rent to pieces by some mighty power, for rocky fragments strewed the earth for yards around. And there, in the midst of this mass of worthless rock, was gold—precious gold, glistening with wondrous splendor in the solitary ray of sunlight that penetrated to this dismal spot. Not in the tiny, insignificant flecks that are the usual reward of the miner; but in solid lumps, of various shapes and sizes—some of them fully as big as a man's fist. Think of it, young man! Lumps of pure gold as big as your fist! There was no mistaking the nature of the glittering ore—I was too old a prospector for that. I realized that, after long years of unrequited toil, a princely fortune now lay at my feet. Do you wonder that I was fairly overcome with joy and excitement?

"There was in this lucky discovery something that savored strongly of the supernatural. To one accustomed to delve for his precious 'ounces' with pick and shovel, the presence of this veritable deluge of golden nuggets seemed quite unexplainable. It was as if some good fairy had had considerably emptied her cornucopia there among the rocks, for the first fortunate traveler to stumble upon; and I, thank Fate! was destined to be that favored mortal. Though I subsequently hunted high and low in the vicinity for further signs of the auriferous, it was quite in vain; for not a trace of mineral wealth was to be found beyond the radius of that magic treasure spot.

"When at length my excitement had abated sufficiently to admit of serious thought, I found myself confronted by a most perplexing problem. How could I dispose of the treasure thus providentially discovered? In its present condition, that glittering mass was of no more value to me than so much worthless stone. It must

first be taken to the haunts of civilization, and there converted into the coin of the realm. How to transport my precious gold thither in safety, was the problem that now obtruded upon my mind.

"An easy matter, that—did you say? Not when you consider the peculiar circumstances in which I was placed. Remember, I was surrounded by a horde of unscrupulous ruffians, scarcely one of whom would hesitate to cut a man's throat to obtain an ounce of gold. Not a man in Satan's Camp enjoyed my confidence to the extent of being intrusted with my secret; and as for removing my treasure alone and unaided, it was a task that would require a number of journeys, since I could conceal but a small quantity on my person at one time. Then, too, I was convinced that my frequent prospecting expeditions had already served to arouse the curiosity of the citizens, inasmuch as I had detected some of them apparently spying upon my movements at various times. It was, indeed, quite possible that the rascals from the camp were at that moment in the immediate vicinity, threatening to swoop down upon my golden treasure.

"After mature deliberation, I decided to *cache* the nuggets and return to camp, there to continue my customary humdrum existence, hoping thereby to disarm the fast rising suspicions of the ruffians, and await the first favorable opportunity to steal away from that pestilential neighborhood with my new-found wealth. A place admirably adapted to my purpose was luckily close at hand, and to it I transferred the precious stuff, gathering each glistening particle with scrupulous care, afterwards concealing the entrance to its hiding-place in a manner well calculated to defy detection by any chance intruder. Indeed, I had serious doubts of being able to find the spot again, myself, so wild and inaccessible was the whole region about; so, to prevent any such calamity, I then and there made a rough memorandum, detailing various topographical features in such a way as to form an infallible guide. This done, I returned to Satan's Camp by a roundabout way, in a decidedly happier frame of mind than when I last left it.

"Had I carried out my carefully pre-arranged plans, all would now be well; but human flesh is weak and prone to error, and it was at this stage of the game that I made the one irretrievable break of my lifetime. Reaching camp just at nightfall, I made my way into one of the numerous saloons, where I was accustomed to spend my leisure time merely as a looker-on, having none of the drinking and gambling propensities of my fellow-citizens. On this occasion, however, highly elated by my good fortune, and longing to express the exuberance of my feelings, it is but natural that I should have been tempted to take a drink or two, just by way of celebration. I yielded to the temptation, and that's what did the mischief, for, not content with the first drink or two, I must needs follow them up with numerous others; and, as the natural consequence of my indiscretion, I soon found myself in a half-drunken, loquacious state that boded ill for the preservation of my secret. Like the besotted fool I was, I openly boasted that I had struck it rich, and, in proof of my statement, triumphantly displayed the pocketful of sample nuggets that I had brought from the hills. This insane demonstration on my part was all-sufficient to make me at once the center of attraction among the gang of toughs and sharpers who filled the room.

"The proprietor of the establishment was King Kirby, a notorious card-sharp, and the acknowledged leader of Satan's Camp—a man who dressed and looked like a gentleman, but who was at heart a thoroughly unprincipled scoundrel. Under pretense of protecting me from the designs of the avaricious crowd, he inveigled me into his private room, and there, under cover of a friendly game of poker, proceeded to rob me at his leisure. So well did he succeed that, inside of half an hour, the last of my golden nuggets had disappeared within his capacious pockets.

"Even then there was a chance to retrieve my blunder, for the mere loss of the gold was of itself insignificant, when compared with the precious secret I possessed; but I must needs make a bad matter worse by giving my maudlin tongue still further sway. Making light of my recent losses, I boasted of the millions that I had *cached* in the mountains, and foolishly hinted at a paper in my possession that gave specific directions for reaching this magic treasure-spot. All of this was eagerly taken in by King Kirby, who immediately sought by threats and coaxing to obtain my secret. I had still sense enough, however, to resist his demands, and luckily made my

escape when he attempted to wrest my secret from me by force.

"But the mischief was done beyond repair; and when, in my first sober moments, I realized the result of my night's spree, it was to mentally curse my stupidity for committing such an egregious error. I was now a marked man in the camp. Knowing well the character of King Kirby, I felt my foolish utterances had inflamed his cupidity to such an extent that he would exert himself to the utmost to penetrate my secret. I comprehended fully the danger of the situation, for King Kirby was the recognized head of a powerful gang that comprised the most vicious element of Satan's Camp. Nevertheless, I was determined never to reveal the secret of the *cache* of gold, even though my life should pay the penalty. I concealed the precious slip of paper, bearing directions for reaching the *cache*, so cunningly that I fancied mortal eyes would never find it. For days I endured a state of eternal fear and worry, the object of constant espionage on the part of King Kirby's minions; living almost without sleep, in constant dread of violence, I felt the situation fast becoming unbearable.

"At length I overheard a plot, by which the gambler proposed to have me seized and carried bodily to the hills, and there force me to confession by the most diabolical torture. This proved an all-powerful incentive to prompt and vigorous action on my part. To save my life, I resolved to abandon my treasure temporarily, and flee from Satan's Camp. So, that very night, I left my enemies deep in their accustomed revelry, and stole unobserved from the camp. Taking the rough mountain-trail that formed the only means of egress from the place, I pushed on in frantic haste, seeking only to put as many miles as possible behind me ere the break of day. In the morning I was overtaken by the daily stage-coach, in which I completed the journey to Fortune City, the nearest point that was penetrated by the railroad. Here I took the first east-bound train, traveling as far as my limited funds would carry me, after which there was no alternative but to hoof it. When I left the train, hundreds of long, weary miles still intervened between me and my ultimate destination—the home of my boyhood; but I entered resolutely upon the task, thankful to escape from Satan's Camp and its murderous denizens. Alas! I had proceeded but a short distance in this fashion, when I was suddenly assailed and overpowered by two burly fellows who stole upon me from behind. Judge my surprise and horror when I recognized in my captors, foes whom I had fondly believed to be a thousand miles away—King Kirby, the gambler, and his right-hand partner in villainy, Black Jerry!

"Apprised of my sudden departure from Satan's Camp, this ill-favored pair of scoundrels had started hot-foot in pursuit, determined that their intended victim should not escape so easily. Arriving at Fortune City too late to prevent my departure, they still clung tenaciously to the trail, boarding the train quite unbeknown to me, alighting at the same station, and afterward seizing the earliest opportunity to pounce upon me like a cat upon a predatory rodent.

"Without ceremony, the ruffians now subjected me to a thorough search; while I, knowing full well what they were looking for, and having the utmost confidence in the security of its hiding-place, viewed their efforts with contempt. They were searching for the paper of which I had so foolishly hinted, giving specific directions for reaching the *cache* of gold. It was solely to obtain that precious scrap of paper that they had tracked me with the persistency of bloodhounds for more than a thousand miles. And now I chuckled to see them search in vain for that which I had so carefully hidden. Completely baffled in their search, the ruffians now turned upon me, and sought by threats to wrest the secret from me; but, in reply, I only laughed in their faces. Finally, exasperated beyond measure by his failure, King Kirby snatched up a heavy club, and with a horrible curse, brought it down upon my head with all the force he could muster. I lost consciousness as I fell, and regained my senses only to find myself lying here, in what I am told is the Richville hospital.

"From the nurse in attendance, I soon learned the story of my discovery upon the track, where no doubt my dastardly foes had placed me, and my subsequent heroic rescue by the engineer of the up-bound Express. Immediately, then, it became my purpose to secure an interview with my brave preserver, and demonstrate my gratitude, not by mere empty words, but in

a far more substantial manner. That interview, happily for us both, was easily brought about; and it now remains to bring matters to a climax as soon as the law'll allow. By way of introduction I have inflicted upon your ears a yarn which, I fear, was much longer-winded than necessity required; but I'm pleased to observe that you have been an attentive listener from first to last, and your patience shall be rewarded, for I will now pass on, without further palaver, to a subject that cannot fail to be of interest to you.

"To be brief, then, I propose to give you the benefit of my great discovery,—to make you sole heir to the hidden wealth that has so excited the cupidity of the men of Satan's Camp. It's not a veritable Golconda, mind you; but I reckon the stuff'll foot a good round million when assayed,—enuff to keep a man in tolerable comfort for the rest of his natural born days. And it's all yours, boy,—ev'ry ounce of it! What say ye? Is the gift worth accepting?"

Headlight Harry had half expected something of the kind, and yet the magnitude of the old miner's offer fairly took his breath away.

"I—I am sure your generosity is unparalleled," he declared, when at length he had recovered sufficiently to use his tongue. "But, surely, you do not intend to give me your entire fortune. Why, you'll want it yourself when you get out of here; or, at least, there are relatives or friends who should be remembered before myself, a perfect stranger."

Gideon Goff smiled sadly as he deliberately shook his head.

"I expected some such argument, so I am prepared to dispose of it at once. Firstly, as regards myself, my hours on earth are numbered, and I shall soon be where sordid pelf is unknown—"

"Nonsense, friend! You are worth a dozen dead men yet. You'll live to circumvent your enemies, and enjoy your hard-earned wealth in peace."

The old prospector gave an impatient gesture.

"No, no! I tell you I'm on my last legs. When I leave this place it will be to go to the cemetery. In regard to kindred, I may say that I have not a relative living; and as for friends, you, Headlight Harry, have shown yourself to be all that the term implies. You, and you alone, shall inherit the *cache* of gold."

"Such being your desire, I shall most assuredly accept the gift," said Headlight Harry, scarcely able to credit his good fortune. "I feel quite undeserving of such marked appreciation, which is quite out of proportion to what slight services I may have rendered; hence my hesitation in the matter. However, I appreciate most highly your unequalled generosity, and I shall endeavor to make good use of the fortune so unexpectedly acquired."

"I am sure you will, my boy," exclaimed Gideon Goff, heartily. "But first, remember, you must secure the gold before you can enjoy it. I can not, unfortunately, give you the precious metal itself, but only the paper which contains the key to its whereabouts. The rest remains for you to perform."

"With the key in my possession, I fancy the task will not be a difficult one."

"Don't be too sure about that, young man. Remember my own experience, and be warned of the perils that beset the stranger in the Wild West. That arch-fiend, King Kirby, together with his numerous satellites, will still be on the lookout for that *cache* of gold, and it will be dangerous to venture into their midst. When you do go for the treasure, it must be with plenty of well-armed friends at your back; otherwise you will probably fall a victim to the wolves of Satan's Camp."

"I shall certainly profit by your advice, and take all possible precautions to avoid trouble; and, with the advantage of possessing the key to the secret hiding-place, I think it will be a comparatively easy matter to circumvent King Kirby and his minions."

"I sincerely hope so, my boy. And now, without wasting further time, let us look at the precious paper that is to guide its new owner to a princely fortune. Yes, I have it right here upon my person, though it would be hard work to make King Kirby believe it, after his recent unavailing search. I fooled the scoundrel completely. Ha, ha, ha!

"Now, Headlight Harry, give me your close attention, and you shall know the whereabouts of that magic guide, to obtain which my traveled a thousand miles in vain. I'll wager you will be surprised to learn the simple method employed to effect its concealment; yet, despite its simplicity, it proved too much for King Kirby's feeble brain. Ho, ho!"

The young engineer drew closer, and awaited with breathless interest the next movements of the dying prospector.

CHAPTER IV.

HEADLIGHT HARRY'S HERITAGE.

SOMEWHAT to Headlight Harry's surprise, Gideon Goff deliberately bared one foot and held it out for inspection.

"Look at that foot!" he commanded; and his visitor obediently fastened his gaze upon the member, mentally wondering what on earth the old man was driving at. "Look at that foot, I say! Examine it well, then tell me if you see anything extraordinary about it."

"I must admit that I do not," was Headlight Harry's response, after a careful inspection of the miner's pedal extremity.

"Ha! I thought so!" and Gideon Goff chuckled as if highly pleased. "I tell you it eludes the sharpest eyes. Now, young man, look again more carefully. Just run your finger over that heel, and see if the sense of touch will not discover that which your sight has failed to reveal."

Still vaguely wondering, the engineer promptly did as directed, and instantly a gleam of light shot athwart his puzzled brain.

"I feel a certain peculiar roughness there," said he. "And—yes, here is a spot that is slightly different in color from the rest of the heel. Ah! I see now! You have applied a small piece of court-plaster to the part; though it adheres so neatly and closely, and is so nearly like the natural skin in hue, that it is well calculated to deceive the casual observer."

"Ay, lad, that it is. An' while you have penetrated the secret, it was not until I had invited your closest attention to the spot. D'ye wonder that King Kirby was baffled? Why, the varmint actually stripped my feet an' turned my socks inside out in his eagerness to find the precious bit of paper, which at that moment lay right under his very nose. Ha, ha!"

"But I do not quite understand, after all. What relation has this bit of plaster to the aforesaid paper?" inquired Headlight Harry, eagerly.

"Why, boy, you are obtuse, an' no mistake," chuckled Gideon Goff. "This plaster serves to cover up the paper, which now lies between it and the skin, as snug as a bug in a rug. D'ye understand?"

"Yes; my fuddled brain has at length grasped the idea, and a brilliant one it is—the idea, I mean, of course. None but a master mind could have devised so ingenious a hiding-place, remarkable alike for its simplicity and efficiency. No mortal eye could detect the secret under ordinary circumstances."

"Well, my boy, the whereabouts of the golden guide being determined upon, it now remains to bring the same to the light of day. To do this will require a liberal application of moisture, for this plaster clings with a most tenacious grip. So, if you will kindly bring me a basin of water and a sponge—"

The desired articles were quickly forthcoming, and applied so industriously that in a few moments Gideon Goff triumphantly held up to view the precious scrap of paper, none the worse for its long imprisonment in that peculiar receptacle.

"At last," he exclaimed, "you see before you the magic guide to fortune—the 'open sesame' to untold wealth. Take it, my lad! It is your inheritance!"

It was with ill-concealed eagerness that Headlight Harry grasped the extended paper. It was scarcely larger than a postage stamp, and covered with writing executed in minute crimson characters. But as the engineer's gaze rested upon the inscription, his face instantly assumed an expression of the most hopeless perplexity; for, while every letter was perfectly legible, the whole was quite as meaningless to him as was the handwriting on the wall to the Babylonian king. And glancing at the old miner, it was to see the latter intently regarding him with a reguish twinkle in his eyes.

"What is the matter, young man?" inquired Gideon Goff, apparently quite amused at the other's bewildered air.

"Why, this inscription—is it Greek, Chinese or Sanskrit?"

"Neither one nor the other, but simply good old Roman characters—rather poorly formed, no doubt, but allowance must be made for the fact that my pen was a sharpened stick, and my ink the juice of a berry."

"But I cannot read it—it's all Dutch to me,"

persisted Headlight Harry, whereat the old prospector chuckled gleefully.

"Of course you can't read it, nobody can but myself," he laughed. "I sprung it on you as a little joke; and it was worth considerable to see the look of surprise that stole over your face. You see, I am something of a cryptogrammatist; and this is a specimen of my skill in that direction. Of course you know what a cryptogram is?"

The engineer shook his head dubiously.

"I must confess my ignorance. I've never met the animal you mention in all my travels," he admitted.

"Well, a cryptogram is a writing in cipher. In this case each letter stands for some other letter, unknown of course save to the maker of the crypt, who possesses the key. To obtain a clew to the puzzle is usually like looking for the proverbial needle in the haystack. I wrote out the directions in cipher for the special benefit of whoever by accident might come into possession of the paper, being confident that there was no one in Satan's Camp who had brains enough to penetrate its meaning. So, you see, if King Kirby had secured the paper, its possession would have been of little use to him. I'll wager the scoundrel could not solve the crypt if he tried for a hundred years. Ha, ha!"

"Surely, you have taken extraordinary precautions for the preservation of your secret," declared Headlight Harry, still curiously regarding the enigmatical inscription. "But, I say, how do you expect I am to benefit by this cipher? It would drive me into a lunatic asylum if I attempted to solve the thing."

"Oh, spare yourself all anxiety on that account," laughed Gideon Goff. "You will have no occasion to rack your brains over this cryptogram, since I intend to explain its meaning thoroughly. In five minutes you will understand the cipher as well as I do. So please listen, while I elucidate the mystery."

With the precious paper clutched in his trembling fingers, the old prospector prepared to give the desired explanation; while Headlight Harry bent eagerly over him, anxious to catch every word that was about to be uttered.

But, alas! Gideon Goff was not to be permitted to elucidate his secret cipher-writing; for at that moment came a most startling interruption.

Breaking suddenly, and with startling distinctness, upon the quietude of the chamber, what was apparently a subdued sneeze fell upon the ears of the two men, causing both to start in mingled surprise and alarm.

"Good God! What was that? There's some one in this room," gasped the old man, fairly vivid with fear.

"It sounded like a sneeze—probably somebody in the corridor outside," returned Headlight Harry, seeking to rally the miner's trepidation, though he himself was filled with sudden doubt and alarm.

At that instant the sound was repeated, louder than before; and this time there was no mistaking either the nature of the noise or the locality from which it emanated.

"I tell you there is some one in this room. They're hiding under this very bed," screamed Gideon Goff, trembling in every limb with sudden terror; and the engineer, knowing full well that his companion spoke the truth, nerved himself for the encounter with the unknown intruder which he felt was certain to follow this denouncement.

The stranger, however, was first to act. Finding detection inevitable, he scrambled quickly from his hiding-place, coming into violent contact with Headlight Harry, who at that moment stooped to peer under the bed. As a result of this sudden collision, the engineer was hurled violently backward, while the intruder, with a cat-like bound, was instantly on his feet.

Then it was that Gideon Goff gave vent to a scream of terror, for despite the semi-darkness of the room, he immediately recognized the newcomer.

"Merciful Heaven! It's King Kirby, again," he gasped.

For a brief moment the massive form of the gambler towered above the cowering wretch on the bed. The latter still clutched his precious cipher, and, as King Kirby saw it, he sprang forward with an inarticulate cry of triumph, and snatched the paper from the nerveless grasp of its owner.

"Ha, ha! At last I triumph, old man," he cried: then turned to find himself confronted by Headlight Harry.

The latter grappled resolutely with the in-

truder, but only to find that he had caught a Tartar, for King Kirby was a veritable giant in size and strength. With a tremendous effort, the gambler threw off the grasp of his opponent, sending him reeling backward. Then he bounded to the open window, threw back the shutters, and darted through the opening, still clutching the precious cipher.

The engineer was instantly at the window, only to find that King Kirby had disappeared. A vine-clad trellis, extending along the side of the building, showed the means by which he had effected both entrance and exit.

That he still lurked in close proximity, however, was evidenced when Headlight Harry sought to follow him down the trellis; for there was a sudden report, and a bullet whistled viciously by his head, warning him of the danger of pursuit in that direction.

Simultaneously, a low cry of agony welled from the lips of Gideon Goff; and, as the engineer glanced in that direction, he was thrilled with horror at the sight that met his gaze. The old miner had fallen back upon the pillow, a crimson stream oozing from a ghastly wound in his temple.

The bullet from King Kirby's revolver, while missing one mark had found another; and Headlight Harry saw at a glance that the unfortunate victim was dead. For an instant he stood in indecision, then sprang to the door with the intention of calling assistance. This was an easy matter, for the pistol-shot had attracted attention, and already several attendants were hastening through the corridors to learn the cause of the disturbance.

So rapidly had these events transpired that scarcely five minutes elapsed after the first appearance of King Kirby before a small, but resolute party, headed by Headlight Harry, entered the hospital grounds in search of the red-handed assassin. Yet, that brief time seemed all-sufficient for the latter to make good his escape, thanks to the prevailing darkness, and a diligent search failed to reveal any trace of his whereabouts.

Meantime, a messenger was dispatched to Police Headquarters, and the minions of the law soon put in an appearance, prepared to take up the pursuit of the murderer. But by this time much valuable time had been lost, and it was not improbable that King Kirby, with such an excellent start, would succeed in leaving the town unobserved.

Having done all in his power to aid in the apprehension of the assassin, Headlight Harry felt his presence no longer necessary, and therefore withdrew, after making arrangements for the proper burial of the old miner at his expense. And as he walked away, it was with a mind assailed by a thousand conflicting thoughts. In such swift succession had recent events crowded upon one another that it can scarcely be wondered at that the youth's brain was in a whirl, and he could hardly believe his late experiences to be other than a most extravagant dream.

The town clock solemnly struck the hour of midnight as Headlight Harry hurried down the silent street; but, despite the lateness of the hour, he turned his footsteps toward the humble home of his boon companion, Rufe Raffle.

That worthy youth had long since sought repose, but the engineer's lusty knocks soon brought him to the window in a state of disbability, sleepily rubbing his eyes and angrily demanding to know the cause of the disturbance.

"Oh, come, old fellow, bottle up your chin-music and let me in. I've come to bunk in with you for the rest of the night. And, moreover, I've something of the utmost importance to communicate; so stir yourself lively, old man, and don't keep me waiting here all night."

"Oh, it's you, is it?" returned the fireman, instantly recognizing his comrade's voice. "Dog my cats if this ain't a purty unseemly hour to be round lookin' for lodgings, rousin' a poor chap out of his hard-earned snooze. Howsumdover, I'll excuse yer this time. Jest wait until I kin crawl inter my trouserloons."

A moment later Rufe had admitted his friend, and was leading the way to his own cozy apartment.

"So you're back from your call on the ole gent, eh? How did you leave his royal nibs?" inquired the fireman, eagerly.

"Sh! Don't speak disrespectfully of the dead, Rufe."

"Dead?"

"Yes; the poor old man has escaped from 'is tribulations at last. A speeding bullet cut short his life, fired by the same individual who left him on the track yesterday,—a bullet, by the way, that was intended for the precious anatomy of yours truly."

"The dickens, you say! Give us the bull'yarn, pard, afore I bu'st with curiosity."

Rufe Ruffle was thoroughly awake, now. No more thoughts of slumber until he heard all that Headlight Harry had to reveal.

The engineer lost no time in recounting his night's adventures; and to say that his listener was astounded thereat would be to but faintly express the true state of his feelings.

"Jumpin' Jehosaphat! A cool million in gold! Why, it sounds like a romance. An' to think that bloodthirsty pirate, King Kirby, should jump in at the critical moment an' carry off the prize. Too bad, pard—too bad!"

"Oh, the jig is not up, yet—not by a long shot," exclaimed Headlight Harry, cheerfully. "Though King Kirby possesses the papers, he is still far from the hidden treasure, inasmuch as the former is written in a secret cipher, the meaning of which will doubtless require no little time to unravel. Thus, at the present moment, we stand on an equal footing as regards knowledge of the location of the cache."

"Well, pard, what d'ye propose to do?"

"Regain possession of that paper, if such a thing is possible," came the determined answer. "I do not intend to surrender what rightfully belongs to me without making a stubborn fight."

"Bully for you, old pard! I admire yer pluck; but, jest the same, it strikes me as how you've tackled a mighty tough job when you try to circumvent that cantankerous scoundrel, King Kirby. How d'ye propose to go about it?"

"Well, Rufe, I must admit my own ideas on that score are somewhat vague at present. Nevertheless, my purpose shall be accomplished by hook or by crook. It is quite probable that Kirby will escape from the officers who are now searching for him, in which case he will make a bee-line for his old stamping grounds, Satan's Camp; and while he is puzzling his brain over that cipher writing, it will give me a chance to arrive on the scene of action. Once there, my subsequent movements will be governed entirely by circumstances."

"It's goin' to be a pesky dangerous undertaking, pard," declared Rufe Ruffle, with an ominous shake of the head. "A case of beard-in the lion in his den, with the probability of gettin' chewed inter mince-meat."

"I'm well aware of the peril, Rufe. Yet, much may be accomplished by cool and judicious action; and the prize at stake is certainly worth a determined effort. Now, what d'ye say, Rufe? Can I count on your assistance in this hazardous undertaking?"

"Kin ye, indeed! Did I ever go back on ye, yet, pard? It 'pears to me something like a fool's errand; nevertheless, I'm with ye through thick and thin. So, make yer calkerlations accordingly."

Headlight Harry grasped the hand of his friend and shook it warmly.

"Good enough, Rufe! You are, indeed, a true friend, and your loyalty shall be rewarded when I strike that golden legacy. And now, pard, it's high time we turned in. To-morrow we will make preparations for our great treasure-hunt."

CHAPTER V.

WESTWARD HO!

"WELL, Rufe, we are slowly but surely approaching the end of the first stage of our long and wearisome journey. Unless something unforeseen happens to prevent, another two hours will find us landed safely within the classic precincts of Fortune City, at which point we must part company with the iron-horse, and intrust our precious anatomy to the tender mercies of a mountain Jehu for the remainder of the distance."

"With a good night's rest sandwiched in between, by way of variety. I sorry for that, you kin bet your boots. I tell you, pard, bein' cooped up in a dusty train for six-an'-thirty hours, a-wearin' out the seat o' your trouserloons, an' nothin' to do but gawk outer the winder at these everlastin' rocks an' hills, kinder makes a feller feel like lightin' on terry-firmer, if only jest long ernuff to kick the kinks out of his legs."

"I agree with you, the situation is a trifle monotonous; yet I, for one, am not disposed to complain, when I think of the forty odd miles of mountain trail that leads from the railroad to that wondrous Mecca of our hopes—Satan's Camp. Perhaps, Rufe, when every joint in your body is loosened by the incessant jolting of a rickety stage-coach, you will wish yourself back to these comfortable cushioned seats."

The speakers, who occupied a seat in the for-

ward coach of a Far Western passenger train, were none other than the Railroad Pard; yet, their most intimate friends might easily have failed to recognize this fact, so decidedly altered was their personal appearance. In place of the fair, beardless youths so familiar to the reader, there now appeared a pair of apparently middle age, with long hair and luxuriant beards that quite concealed the lower half of their faces. Their garments, of coarse but serviceable material, were neat and well-fitting, and nicely adapted to the character they had seen fit to impersonate. They consisted of flannel shirt, jacket and trousers, the latter being tucked into heavy boots, and supported by a broad leather belt, from which the usual six-shooter was suspended; while a broad-brimmed felt hat, resting jauntily on the head, went to complete the very ordinary make-up of the Railroad Pard. Indeed, to look at the cunningly disguised railroaders, the keenest observer would fail to suspect that they were other than the typical Westerners their looks and manners would indicate.

As Headlight Harry had expected, the dastardly slayer of Gideon Goff had succeeded in making good his escape from the Richville officers, and no doubt was now safely hidden in the far western mining region that was his favorite stamping-ground, and to which it was now the purpose of the Railroad Pard to follow. The latter had lost no time in completing their arrangements for pursuit; and, while entering upon the project with their usual vim and determination, it was not without proper appreciation of the manifold perils that attended such an undertaking.

To enter the haunts of King Kirby in their own true character would be suicidal to their plans; hence, the adoption of a disguise was an imperative necessity. In this extremity, the pard soon found a friend in need in the person of a local wig-maker, well-known to them, whose secrecy could be depended upon; and, under his deft fingers, they underwent a facial metamorphosis so wonderfully complete that there was no longer any hesitation about entering the camp of the enemy.

The question of disguise being thus effectually settled, there was nothing to prevent the Railroad Pard from taking the next train for the West. Not a word had been breathed to any one concerning their intentions, not even to their friend, the wig-maker; and when they quietly departed, secure in their efficient disguise, not a soul in Richville was cognizant of the fact. And now, less than three days after the tragic death of Gideon Goff, we find the determined young treasure-seekers rapidly drawing near the end of their journey.

It was some time after sunset, and the shades of night were already fast falling in the gloomy, mountain-walled valley, when the train drew up at an unimportant station and two passengers hurried aboard. The personal appearance of the new-comers, together with the manner of their entrance, served to attract general attention.

The first stranger was a typical mountaineer, gigantic in stature, shabby in attire, with shaggy, unshorn locks and a fiery red beard that reached the breast of his greasy buckskin-shirt. He was apparently well-filled with "bug-juice," and wore the air of a veritable fire-eater as he swaggered up the aisle. His companion was an undersized individual, a trifle better dressed and considerably less bewhiskered, who followed demurely in the big man's wake, lugging a dilapidated valise.

The giant burst into the car like a miniature cyclone, ruthlessly thrusting aside the brakeman, throwing open the door with a bang, and finally bringing up in the first vacant seat, landing therein with a force that threatened annihilation to the company's furniture.

"Hooray! Here we cum at last, gents; the fiery, untamed wonders of the woolly West. You've heard tell of us, gents—I'm Thunderbolt Tommy, the mountain bravo; an' this here galoot is my pard, Midget Mike, the biggest little card-sharp and hoss-thief 'twixt here an' Frisco! Oh, we're a reg'lar team o' ripsnorters, we are; an' this is our first ride on the railroad kyars. Ker-whoop!"

The "ripsnorter" settled his prodigious frame as comfortably as the limited space available would permit, and proceeded to take in the surroundings with the air of one who is looking for the first time on the marvels of a modern passenger coach.

"So this here is a railroad kyar," he ejaculated, at length. "Mighty fine ranch, too, durn my ugly hide if it ain't. A reg'lar palace on wheels! Shoot me for a Greaser if

this hyar seat ain't a durn sight better'n the back of a mule, an' a stolen one at that. Say, Mikey, ye durn little snipe, jest shove along a bit an' give yer uncle elbow-room. Ye allers was a hog, Mikey; but, hang me, if ye don't keep yer own side o' the seat, I'll pitch ye outer the winder, body, bones an' britches. Ho, ho, ho!"

A vigorous poke in the ribs evoked a grunt of pain from the little man, and caused him to shrink as far from the giant as the arm of the seat would allow, where he continued to sit demurely, in ludicrous contrast with the other, who towered above him like Gulliver over Lilliputian.

This noisy demonstration had not failed to attract general attention to the new-comers. It was apparent that the big fellow who had styled himself Thunderbolt Tommy was just drunk enough to be garrulous, and the least bit quarrelsome; while the other man seemed disgusted at the behavior of his traveling companion, and sought by soothing words to quiet his frequent outbursts of uncouth eloquence, though with no visible effect.

It chanced that the Railroad Pard occupied a seat just behind and obliquely across from that appropriated by the blatant mountaineer and his diminutive associate; and, as the garrulous discourse continued, they began to take more than ordinary interest in the proceedings.

"What d'ye think of our talkative friend, yonder?" at length whispered Rufe Ruffle to his companion.

"Simply that he isn't so big a fool as he looks," came the ready reply in the same guarded tones. "That chap is no drunker than I am, and his cheap talk is all a blind. The fellow is playing a part."

"Jest my opinion, eggsactly, pard. But what's their little game, anyway?"

"That time, alone, can demonstrate. However, that there is some evil work on foot I very strongly suspect. Keep your eye on the fellows, and when, at length, they show their hand, it is barely possible we may be able to give them a surprise party."

The Railroad Pard continued to keep a narrow watch upon the objects of their new-born suspicion. If any deviltry was afoot, they were resolved to do their share toward preventing its consummation.

Meantime, half an hour had elapsed since the appearance of the strangers, and the train was moving steadily westward at a lively rate. Thunderbolt Tommy had for several minutes lapsed into perfect silence; but now he suddenly burst forth again with renewed vigor.

"Holy rattlesnakes, Mickey! It's a devilish long time atween drinks on this hyar train. Durned if my in'ards hain't a-dryin' up for want of irrigation. Mickey, ole pard, pass out that spare flask that's in that 'ere valise o' yours. Lively, now, afore I choke to death!"

"There's only a drop left—"

"Never mind. That's better'n nothin'. Pass 'er out, lively! D'ye hear?"

"But, er—I say, pard, don't ye think ye've had—er—er—'bout enuff licker?" remonstrated the little man, in a timorous voice.

"Wot's that ye say, ye durn little whippersnapper? Haven't I had enuff licker? Ha, ha, ha! Hee, hee, hee! Ho, ho, ho! Who dares tell Thunderbolt Tommy that he's had enuff licker? Great prowlin' panthers! I'm the great, untamed ripsnorter of the Rockies, an' when I raise my dulcet voice something's got ter drop. Gimme that valise, blast yer dirty hide!"

The "ripsnorter's" voice resounded like the bellow of a rampant bull. In a twinkling he had snatched up the valise lying at the little man's feet, torn it open and pounced upon the precious flask. Then, as he held it to the light, the look of triumph instantly yielded to one of deep disgust and anger.

"Great jumpin' jack-rabbits! Not a durn drop left!"

The next moment the strong arm of the exasperated giant described a sudden motion; then followed a crash of glass as flask, valise and all went flying through the window.

"There goes yer pesky valise," roared the infuriated ruffian. "An' I've half a mind ter throw ye after it, yer durn leetle half-growned monkey!"

Then, for the first time, the little man showed symptoms of life and energy. He was on his feet like a flash, gesticulating wildly, and shouting at the top of his voice.

"You darn fool, you've done it, now! That grip had all our money in it," he shrieked. "Stop the train! Stop the train, somebody! I must have my valise!"

Dancing in the aisle like a madman, his gaze

tell suddenly upon the bell-rope. Instantly he seized it and pulled viciously, again and again, until the cord parted from the strain and fell slack in his hands.

"Ha, ha! That's the little trick that wins the game," laughed the little man, in high glee.

"Ho, ho! So it does, indeed!" echoed Thunderbolt Tommy, who, with anger abated with wonderful quickness, now stood eying his companion with a complacent grin.

Then upon the ears of the astonished passengers suddenly sounded a third voice, outringing loud and clear.

"Hold hard, my fine fellows! The game is not yet played. We are in this deal, and the cards are inclined to run our way, just now. So, up with your hands, you dastardly skunks, if you wish to save your heads! Lively, now!"

And, to their utter surprise and discomfiture, the two new-comers found themselves neatly covered by revolvers in the hands of the Railroad Pards!

CHAPTER VI.

THE TRAIN-ROBBERS.

It was a startling tableau that greeted the eyes of the conductor of the west-bound Express, as he chanced to enter the forward coach just at that critical moment.

There stood the Railroad Pards, side by side, each with trusty six-shooter cocked and leveled, and with stern, set faces that clearly bespoke their determination; while directly opposite were the two strangers, Thunderbolt Tommy and Midget Mike, each a picture of disgust and rage, with arms promptly elevated in obedience to the command of Headlight Harry. About this interesting group were gathered a car-load of passengers, each thoroughly imbued with the excitement of the moment.

Such was the scene upon which the thunder-struck official gazed for a moment in mute amazement.

"Gentlemen, what is the meaning of all this?" he demanded, when at length he could find utterance.

"It means, sir, that a shrewd plot has been discovered, and, perhaps, frustrated," was Headlight Harry's ready response. "To be brief, these fellows got up a sham quarrel, during which one threw off the other's valise, to recover which the latter has signaled the engineer to stop. I believe, sir, that these scamps have confederates ahead whose object it is to rob this train. Their recent maneuver was but a shrewd device for stopping the train without arousing suspicion of their true purpose. That's just what it means!"

At these words a murmur of surprise and indignation ran through the car, a grim foreboding of the storm that threatened ill to the two strangers, should Headlight Harry's accusation prove true. The suspects, however, faced the music with a show of righteous indignation that was truly refreshing.

"It's a lie, gentlemen! A gol-durned, whoppin' lie! Great hoppin' horn-toads! Somebody's goin' to suffer for this insult to me, the great American ripsnorter. You hear me?" bellowed Thunderbolt Tommy.

"All right, mister! In case I have made a mistake, I'm ready at any time to answer for the consequences," was Headlight Harry's ready retort. "Now, conductor, there's no time to waste. If this train is allowed to stop, the result will be disastrous. Already we are losing speed, and the engineer must be warned at once to keep ahead."

The conductor was a cool, quick-witted fellow, who had enjoyed considerable experience with the light-fingered gentry of the West; and, with the knowledge of previous wrecks and robberies fresh in his mind, he was inclined to share the suspicions of the Railroad Pards.

"Hang me if I don't believe you're right, gentlemen. I'll signal Bill to go ahead," he exclaimed.

But when his eyes rested on the broken bell-cord, his face lengthened perceptibly, and an exclamation of disgust escaped him.

"Blue blazes! Here's a pretty fix. What the dickens is to be done?"

"Leave it to me—I think I see a way out of the difficulty," cried Headlight Harry, hurriedly. "Some of you draw a bead on these rascals and see that they do no mischief. Now, Rufe, come with me!"

Many of the passengers were armed, and the suspects found themselves menaced by fully a dozen deadly weapons; while Headlight Harry, pausing only to see that his directions

were followed, dashed from the car with Rufe Ruffle close at his heels.

His object was to communicate with the engineer and warn him to keep ahead. Could this be done in time to save the train? Rushing through the baggage car, he reached the platform only to find further progress blocked by the Express car, the door of which was securely locked and barred.

It was altogether improbable that the vigilant messenger within, ever on the alert for train-robbers, could be induced to open the door; at least, not without fatal delay. And Headlight Harry did not propose to waste time in the attempt. The bell-rope still hung slack, having evidently parted close to the engine.

Headlight Harry lost no time in hesitation. If passage could not be had through the car, the only alternative was to go over it. In a twinkling he had sprung upon the brake head, grasped the projecting roof with both hands and pulled himself to the top, in which athletic feat Rufe Ruffle was scarcely behind him.

It was a hazardous task to crawl on hands and knees over the rounded, slippery roof of the swaying coach, for the slightest mismovement might suffice to send them to destruction; but the Railroad Pards accomplished the feat in safety, and an agile, cat-like swing carried them from the roof to the front platform, with nothing but the tender between them and the engine crew.

Meanwhile, the engineer was earnestly engaged in bringing his train to a standstill, in obedience to what he believed to be the conductor's signal, and blissfully unconscious of the shrewd game that was being attempted. Owing to the excessive speed of the train, together with a heavy down-grade, several minutes were required to accomplish this purpose; so, when the Railroad Pards reached the front platform, the train was still moving at a moderate speed, though losing momentum with every passing moment.

Grasping the broken end of the bell-cord, which dangled loosely from the tender, Headlight Harry gave a series of lusty jerks that speedily attracted the engine-crew's attention.

"Go on, go on! Don't stop, for Heaven's sake! There's danger if you do. Keep on at full speed, I tell you!"

But, though the young railroader shouted at the top of his lungs, his words were drowned by the grind of wheels and hiss of escaping steam. His eager gesticulations, however, were seen and understood.

At that moment the headlight's vivid glare revealed fully a score of armed men grouped upon the track just in advance of the slowly moving train. Their presence there was fraught with grim significance to the veteran engineer, who needed no second glance to convince him of the true state of affairs.

Like a flash his trained hand flew to the throttle, but, even as he made the movement, there came a sudden fusilade of pistol-shots, and bullets flew through the cab like hail. Shot through the brain, the engineer fell from his seat like a log. The fireman, too, sunk lifeless to the floor, pierced by a dozen balls.

In another instant the engine rolled into the midst of the waiting robbers, already gaining fresh impetus from the last desperate effort of its dead master. As the locomotive rushed by, there was a determined effort on the part of the outlaws to jump aboard, and, while most of them received only an awkward tumble for their pains, a few were fortunate enough to secure a footing on the steps of the cab and the foremost car.

The Railroad Pards had discreetly thrown themselves flat on the platform even as the first shot was fired, thus escaping the leaden hail that hurtled viciously through the air; and now they found their position disputed by two burly ruffians who suddenly scrambled upon the steps, one on either side. The latter were doubtless surprised to find the platform already occupied, and the alert railroaders gave them no chance to recover.

A bullet from Headlight Harry's ready six-shooter quickly placed one of the robbers hors-du-combat, while Rufe Ruffle disposed of his man with equal facility, though in a far different manner. Having no time to draw a weapon, he quickly raised his foot and planted it full in the outlaw's face. With features crushed and battered by the heavy boot, the fellow shot backward, like a stone from a catapult, and rolled over and over down the steep embankment.

Having thus unceremoniously disposed of their nearest foes, the Railroad Pards now turned their attention to the ones who had succeeded in effecting a lodgement on the engine. These

they saw to be but two in number. A quick glance back showed the remainder of the gang running after the train, their shadowy forms just visible in the deepening gloom. Evidently none of them had succeeded in boarding the train as it sped past, and they were now depending upon their more fortunate comrades to check the flight of the iron horse.

And the precious pair in the cab were devoting their energies to that end, quite oblivious of the fact that a formidable foe was watching their every movement, bent on frustrating their dastardly scheme.

"The game is ours for keeps, Rufe. It's two to two, and we've got the drop," coolly whispered Headlight Harry. "Just take the chap on the left, pard, and blaze away when I say the word."

"All right. I've got a bead on the durned galoot, a'ready," was Rufe's cautious reply.

Little thought the two rascals in the cab that grim death at that instant stalked in their midst; and their first admonition of danger was when two pistol-shots, blended as one, sounded above the clatter of the speeding train.

Then followed two cries of mortal agony, and two forms fell writhing to the floor, while with triumphant shouts the Railroad Pards clambered over the tender and into the cab.

"Hooray! The day is ours," cried Rufe Ruffle, in high glee. "Tell you, pard, we've jest enuchered the varmints in fine sty. Now, what's the next move?"

"To clap on full steam, and run away from that dangerous gang, back yonder," replied Headlight Harry, suiting the action to the word.

Once more the train sped swiftly onward, saved by the coolness and bravery of the Railroad Pards, leaving the would-be robbers hopelessly behind.

"I suppose," went on the engineer, as he climbed into the high seat, and proceeded to perform his self-allotted duties as nonchalantly as if he was in the cab of his own machine, "that we shall have to officiate in the capacity of engine crew, at least until the next station is reached, since the original crew is scarcely in condition for active service. Well, I guess I can stand the infliction, though I had scarcely calculated upon being back in an engine cab so soon."

"Wal, pard, the sooner I get rid of my job the better I shall like it, if I've got to travel with these cadavers any great distance," declared the fireman, with a look askance at the four motionless forms that lay in a ghastly heap upon the floor. "Shoot my cats, if this byar cab don't look more like a first-class slaughter-pen than anything else I kin think of."

Meantime, while the Railroad Pards, alone and unaided, were devoting all their energies to the preservation of the Western Express, the passengers remained in a state of anxiety and doubt as the final outcome of this unexpected difficulty. The sound of fire-arms at length told them that the would-be robbers had been encountered, while the subsequent uninterrupted flight of the train led them to hope that all peril had been passed in safety.

None were quicker to comprehend the true state of affairs than Midget Mike and Thunderbolt Tommy, the precious pair of plotters who were unexpectedly brought to grief at the hands of the Railroad Pards. Under cover of a dozen revolvers, they had remained in meek submission, confident that their confederates would soon be on hand to relieve them of their embarrassing position. But when at length they realized that relief was to be no longer expected from that quarter, the thought of their own probable fate nerved them to desperation, and they made a sudden and determined break for liberty.

With a defiant yell, Thunderbolt Tommy bounded like a tiger toward the nearest door, which was only a few feet away, with the little man following close at his heels. Instantly a scathing volley greeted this audacious attempt at escape; and Midget Mike went down before a well-directed shot. But though half-a-dozen balls had pierced his flesh, the giant desperado kept on. He reached the platform and, leaping desperately out into space, disappeared from the horrified gaze of the spectators.

It was altogether probable that instant death rewarded this foolhardy plunge; but whether Thunderbolt Tommy survived or perished was a question that interested the passengers but little, so be it they were well rid of his unwelcome presence.

Ten minutes after this stirring episode, the train drew up at a small station; and then it was that those on board first learned the details

the exciting scenes through which they had passed. When it became known just what part the Railroad Pards had borne in the conflict, the latter were immediate recipients of unstinted praise from both passengers and trainmen: for it was universally admitted that to the daring efforts of these gallant young railroaders was owed the safety of property if not of life.

Since there was no engineer available at this point, to take the train on its way, Headlight Harry volunteered to continue in that capacity as far as his destination, Fortune City, which was now but a few miles distant. There would be no difficulty in securing new men at that point, since it was the regular place for changing locomotives and crews.

The four dead bodies were removed from the cab to the baggage-car, much to Rufe Ruffle's relief, and then the train proceeded on its way to Fortune City, that enterprising town being soon reached without further incident.

No sooner did the wheels of the iron-horse cease to revolve, than the Railroad Pards leaped from the cab and mingled with the crowd that thronged the platform. With their usual modesty, they shrunk from being lionized, and accordingly made haste to escape from the vicinity, and thus avoid the demonstration that would probably be forthcoming.

And so when the grateful conductor of the Western Express, whose run ended at this point, came to seek the heroes of the hour, filled with a laudable desire to "do the handsome," he was both surprised and chagrined to find they had silently stolen away. And while he searched eagerly up and down the station platforms, the objects of his quest were quietly making their way to the nearest hostelry, where, after enjoying a hearty supper, they immediately repaired to their room, and were soon sleeping as only men can sleep who are worn and weary from a long and hazardous journey.

CHAPTER VII.

FORTUNE CITY.

At a seasonable hour next morning the Railroad Pards were astir, quite refreshed by a night of sound, unbroken slumber; and, after partaking of a hearty breakfast, sallied forth to inspect the place in which they had been set down.

Fortune City was a typical Western community which had passed triumphantly through its embryo state as a struggling mining-camp, and now, with a number of marvelous lodes within its limits, was fairly launched upon the road to prosperity. Then, too, the recent projection of a railroad through the place had served to give a wonderful impetus to its growth, at the same time increasing the self-importance of its inhabitants to such an extent that they were now inclined to look down upon their less favored neighbors.

Yet, while the people of Fortune City boasted of their superior civilization and progress, it was a noticeable fact that they fondly clung to many of the objectionable features that characterized the camp in the first era of its existence. Churches and schools were conspicuous for their scarcity; but saloons, concert-halls and gaming-dens flourished on every hand. The populace, representing almost every nation on the face of the globe, comprised good, bad and indifferent; but the former class were decidedly in the minority. Thieves, cut-throats, blacklegs of every description commingled with their more respectable neighbors. Everybody was on the go, and the streets of the town, even at this early hour, presented a lively appearance.

The Railroad Pards were not slow in "sizing up" the place into which their peregrinations had led them, and it would be a slight stretching of the truth to say that they were favorably impressed by what they saw. The boisterous, rough-and-ready nature of the town and its people seemed strange and unnatural to the unsophisticated youths from the East, who felt sadly out of place amid such turbulent surroundings.

The young railroaders learned upon inquiry that they had arrived in Fortune City too late to connect with the stage-coach forming the only means of communication with Satan's Camp, which celebrated community nestled high among the hills full thirty miles distant, at the end of a rugged wagon-trail. A single rickety vehicle, in the last stage of dilapidation, formed the entire rolling-stock of the line, and, owing to the extreme roughness of the way, this required about all day in which to perform the journey, going and returning on alternate days. Lack

of transportation, therefore, necessitated a sojourn in Fortune City until the following morning.

Nor were the pards particularly displeased at this prospect, since it gave them an opportunity to gain a slight insight into the peculiarities of far western life, ere venturing into the very midst of their enemies. Recognizing their own inexperience, it was to feel that all knowledge thus acquired would be of valuable aid in their future movements.

Accordingly, they set out with the determination to "do the town up brown," as Rufe Ruffle expressed it, with eyes and ears wide open, prepared to drink in all the wonders of this bustling Western "city." They found plenty to instruct and amuse them, for new scenes presented themselves at every turn. Street fights and disturbances of various kinds were not infrequent, and in one of these the Railroad Pards suddenly found themselves called upon to play a prominent part.

Strolling leisurely along, wrapt in contemplation of the stirring sights around them, they turned a corner just in time to witness an interesting scene, and one which they had scarcely anticipated.

A young woman, swinging a basket on her arm, was tripping lightly through the street in their direction. Her course led past a saloon in front of which stood perhaps a dozen loafers, all in various stages of intoxication. As she was about to pass, one of the group, a burly six-foot ruffian, deliberately barred the way with his stalwart form.

"Hold on, thar, my beauty! I reckon I've got a word to say to ye," he roughly exclaimed. "Hold on, I tell ye! No passin' hyar until I've said my leetle say."

The girl drew back a step, and fixed a pair of glittering black eyes upon the loafer's face.

"What d'ye want?" she sharply demanded, in a voice that betrayed neither surprise nor alarm at this sudden intrusion.

"Wal, my dear," explained the big ruffian, with a horrible leer, "ye see I've made a leetle bet with the gents hyar that I'd kiss the first woman that cum this way. An' you, my angel, happen to be that very fortunate young female. Do ye catch on the situation, my concentrated lump of sweetness?"

On the girl's fair face appeared a look of ineffable scorn and disgust.

"I reckon you've lost your bet, Mister Man," she coolly retorted. "I dunno's I'd object to bein' kissed by a good-lookin' young feller, but when it comes to a big, overgrown, rum-guzzlin' lubber with a nose like a beet an' a mouth like a crocodile's, I reckon I'll have to be excused. So please drag you lubberly carcass out of the way, an' let me pass without further palaver."

A roar of laughter went up from the assembled loafers at the expense of their discomfited companion, whose face was now redder than his nose with the rage that these cutting words expressed.

"Go easy, ye little spitfire!" he exclaimed. "I opine ye don't know who ye'r talkin' to, else ye wouldn't shoot off yer mouth quite so freely. I'm the great Florida Alligator, I am, an' when I set out to do a thing, I reckon it's as good as done. So, young woman, jest prepare to be smacked by yer royal uncle. What can't be cured must be endured, ye know. Haw, haw, haw!"

He advanced a step as he finished speaking, but the movement did not seem to intimidate the young woman in the least.

"Once more, Mister Alligator, I say, stand aside and let me pass," she sternly cried. "If you don't—"

"If I don't? Ho, ho, ho! If I don't? Well, my leetle vixen, w'ot'll happen if I don't?" laughed the ruffian, boisterously, as he continued to advance.

"Just this, you cowardly brute!"

The girl's hand executed a lightning-like movement, and a cocked revolver found its way to within an inch of the giant's nose. Before he could even think of dodging, the hammer descended.

Under ordinary circumstances the next moment would have found the "great Florida Alligator" food for the coyotes; but, fortunately for him, the cartridge failed to explode.

With an angry roar he bounded forward, seized the girl in his powerful arms, and wrenched the weapon from her grasp.

"Ho, ho! So ye'd shoot the great Florida Alligator, would ye, ye durn cantankerous little spitfire! I reckon we can't allow any such a calamity as that to fall on this hyar community.

Ye oughter be careful, gal, how ye flourish round them pesky shootin'-irons—they might go off by accident, ye know, an' hurt somebody. Haw, haw, haw!"

"Let me go, you drunken lout! Take your dirty paws off'n me, I say!"

"Ho, ho! I reckon not, my dear, not if I knows myself. I've got ye dead to rights, now, an' ye don't pass hyar until ye've paid the toll."

The young woman, nothing daunted, struggled desperately for freedom, only to find herself like an infant in the ruffian's powerful grasp.

About this time the Railroad Pards, who had arrived upon the scene just in time to overhear the conversation between the maid and the ruffian, concluded it was time to take a hand.

Two muscular hands suddenly clutched the big bully by the collar, dragging him violently backward. The astonished "Alligator" quickly released the girl, at the same time making an effort to turn and face his unknown assailant, but he was not quick enough to save himself. Another vigorous movement of those muscular arms sent him staggering forward, while almost simultaneously a broad-toed boot caressed the amplest portion of his anatomy. This vigorous assault proved too much for the ruffian's equilibrium, and the next moment found him sprawling ignominiously on the ground.

The burst of laughter that greeted the giant's downfall swelled to a roar as he struggled to his feet, cursing and gesticulating wildly. Covered with dirt from head to foot, with clothing torn and disarranged, his ruddy proboscis skinned and bleeding from an abortive attempt to plow up the unyielding earth, he certainly presented an aspect well calculated to provoke the risibilities of the delighted lookers-on.

Unmindful of the girl, who had by this time disappeared in the crowd, the big fellow now looked only for the man who had so deftly brought about his discomfiture.

"Where is he? Where is he?" he howled, dancing about like a bear on a red-hot stove. "Show me the feller w'ot struck the great Florida Alligator. Produce him—trot him out, say I, an' see me grind him inter dust quicker'n a cat kin jump a fence. Great hoppin' horn-toads! Will nobody point the durned galoot out ter me?"

His appeal was not in vain, for in an instant Headlight Harry had confronted him, with resolute face and fiercely blazing eyes.

"I reckon I'm the man you're looking for," he coolly exclaimed. "I had the satisfaction of kicking you into the gutter, just now, and nothing would please me better than to repeat the dose, in case you still hanker for more of the same medicine."

A murmur of surprise and admiration ran through the throng as this bold declaration fell from the lips of the youthful stranger. He who styled himself the "great Florida Alligator" was the acknowledged bully of Fortune City, admired and toadied to by the lesser luminaries of his own ilk, despised by the more respectable element, yet, cordially feared by the entire community, friends and foes alike. It was but rarely that a man could be found bold enough to dispute the sway of this giant bruiser, and they invariably paid dearly for their temerity. Therefore, while the assembled throng of spectators admired the plucky spirit of the stranger, they felt that the redoubtable Alligator was about to add one more to his long list of victims, and accordingly looked eagerly for the process of annihilation to begin.

The big bully, himself, was so astonished by Headlight Harry's audacity that for fully a minute he could do nothing but stare at the latter with open mouth and protruding eyes.

"Great jumpin' jack-rabbits! Has it come to this?" he howled, at last, fairly livid with wrath. "Young feller, I opine ye don't know who yer a-talkin' to. I'm the great, untamed Florida Alligator, I am, an' ev'ry time I snap my jaws a victim disappears. You hear me twitter, you 'tarnal whipper-snapper?"

"Ha, ha! The Florida Alligator, eh? You sport an euphonious appellation, my friend, and I'm sure it suits your complexion to a T. Why, a man with a phiz like yours ought to make his fortune in a dime museum, posing as a first-class freak. You're a whole menagerie on wheels."

"W'ot's that? Another insult to be wiped out in blood! Holy snakes! but won't I make ye suffer for all this back talk? Durn yer pisen hide, yer ugly, white-livered son of a sea-cook—ye 'tarnal spindle-shanked—"

"Hold on, my red-nosed friend!" the engineer blandly interrupted. "Please spare your vocabulary any further strain, for I cannot waste time

...ening to your foolish babbling. Hope if we ever meet again I shall find you in a more amiable mood. Ta, ta!"

Headlight Harry turned away as he spoke, anxious to put an end to this senseless war of words; but the Alligator was evidently determined to have it otherwise, for with one tiger-like bound he placed himself before the youth, waving his long arms and cursing wildly.

"Ho, ho! No ye don't, my daisy!" he roared. "I reckon ye don't git away from the great Florida Alligator so easy. Thought ye was mighty smart, didn't ye, to grab a feller from behind an' roll him in the mud? But now, when the opportunity presents to tackle that same feller face to face, yer heart slumps inter yer boots, an' yer wants ter sneak away like a yaller cur, with his tail between his legs. Haw, haw, haw! How's that for a crawfish, boyees?"

The crowd, too, had accepted Headlight Harry's attempted retreat as an unmistakable mark of cowardice, and the boss bruiser's appeal was met by a command to "sail in an' eat up the tenderfoot, 'thout any more durned palaver." This the Alligator was both ready and anxious to do, judging by the way he pranced around his intended victim, brandishing his arms and spitting on his hands by way of preliminaries ere settling down to the work of annihilating the tenderfoot.

Rufe Ruffle, who had hitherto remained a silent spectator, felt a trifle uneasy as he witnessed these warlike preparations.

"Look out, pard!" he whispered, warningly. "That big cuss 'll chew ye inter mince-meat. Le's make a break an' git out o' hyar."

"And get shot in the back as a reward for our cowardice? Not much, old man! Keep cool, pard, an' just leave this overgrown lout to me. I fancy I can dispose of him without much difficulty."

Much though the engineer disliked to figure in a street fight, he felt that in this case there was no alternative, for the belligerents were by this time encompassed by a dense crowd of on-lookers, who would be satisfied with nothing less than a genuine set-to, and who would undoubtedly frustrate any attempt to retreat. And, since he must face the music, he resolved to pitch in and have the matter over as soon as possible.

"See here, Mister What's-your-name," he exclaimed, suddenly advancing upon the cavorting ruffian, "I see you're spoilin' for a fight, and, such being the case, I'm inclined to accommodate you. But I warn you in advance that you'll git badly licked, so, if you wish to back out, you're at perfect liberty to do so. Better take my advice an' levant before your handsome phiz is in worse condition than it is already."

"Wot? Me back out?—me levant? Me, the great untamed Alligator of the everglades? Great hoppin' horn-toads! Who ever heard the like o' that? Hang me for a hoss-thief, young feller, if ye ain't the cheekiest tenderfoot wot ever cum to Fortune City. Seems almost too bad to slaughter sich a precious lamb, but it's gotter be done. Ker-whoop!"

For an instant they stood, facing each other, and as the expectant spectators compared the slight, lithe form of the youth with the huge, overtowering frame of his antagonist, it was to feel that the latter would win an easy victory. Headlight Harry, however, while quick to realize the superior size of his adversary, felt confident that his scientific knowledge of the manly art, with no little strength to back it, would prove more than a match for sheer brute force; and, accordingly, he now proceeded to force matters to a head.

"So you still want satisfaction, eh?" he cried boldly. "Very well, you shall have it in liberal doses. I've given you a fair chance to quit honorably and save your bacon, so you'll have your own pigheadedness to thank for the result. Now, Mister Alligator, prepare to receive a sound thrashing. Here I come! Fair warning! Look out for yourself!"

Then, before the burly ruffian could realize what was coming, Headlight Harry made a cyclonic rush and planted a clinch fist squarely between his eyes. Down went the Alligator like a log, lying for a moment dazed and breathless; the next, however, saw him again on his feet, rushing madly at his nimble antagonist. The latter adroitly avoided the rush, at the same time landing a clever upper cut that caught the giant under the chin and lifted him fully a foot into the air. Then followed such an exhibition of scientific fisticuffs as had never before been witnessed by the astonished men of Fortune City.

Headlight Harry danced around his big antagonist with the agility of a monkey, raining blow after blow upon his head and face with

marvelous force and precision, and easily evading the vicious, but random blows of the giant, who fought blindly and entirely without method. The latter was not slow in realizing that he had caught a Tartar, and made repeated rushes in the desperate endeavor to seize his agile foe and crush him in his powerful arms; but the engineer was too wide-awake to be thus caught napping, and, while keeping clear of the Alligator's grip, still maintained a fistic fusilade upon that worthy's facial organs.

The spectators, meantime, looked on in breathless silence, utterly paralyzed with astonishment at this unexpected turn of affairs. They had looked for a one-sided contest, and such it proved to be; but the tide of battle was setting exactly contrary to expectations, and the great Florida Alligator was the under dog in the fight, instead of his intended victim. Nor were they particularly grieved at seeing the boss bruiser of Fortune City being literally whipped "clean out of his boots." This fickle Western crowd, never so happy as when witnessing a lively fight, always made it a point to cheer for the winner; and the murmur of approval that followed the first blow of the engineer rapidly swelled to a roar, each successful hit being greeted by a wild yell of applause that fairly made the welkin ring. And in that entire assembly no one was more delighted than Rufe Ruffle, who watched the marvelous performance of his friend in open-mouthed amazement.

For perhaps five minutes the luckless Alligator withstood that merciless assault; at the end of that time he sunk upon his knees, with hands upraised to ward off the expected blows, and howled lustily for mercy. He presented a most woe-begone spectacle with both eyes closed, blood streaming from his nose, and his entire face bruised and battered from contact with the iron fists of his antagonist.

A few faithful adherents carried him from the arena, amidst the jeers and laughter of the spectators who had erstwhile been so lavish in applause, while one enthusiastic native howled in a voice that rose high above the din:

"Now, boyees, fill up yer lungs an' give three times three for the dandy tenderfoot. Hip, hip, Hooray!"

And then five hundred lusty voices smote the air in a mighty chorus, applauding the plucky youth who had thus signally vanquished the boss bruiser of Fortune City.

CHAPTER VIII.

WILD NELL.

"SAY, pard!"

"Well, Rufe?"

"It strikes me with the force of a pile-driver that we've made a pooty reckless beginnin' to our career in the wild an' woolly West. First we take upon ourselves the task o' killin' off a gang o' train-robbers; next we git tangled up in a rough-an'-tumble street fight through our desire to help innocence an' beauty in distress. Wot the next difficulty 'll be the good Lord only knows. I reckon we started off at too fast a clip, an' the sooner we down brakes the better it 'll be for our health."

"Ha, ha! Rufe, old man, what on earth are you growling about? Little need of worry now, I guess, since we came out of both adventures with flying colors."

"Which is no sign that we'll be so lucky next time. I tell ye, pard, it behooves us to keep our durned meddlesomeness in check after this, afore we find ourselves in a box."

"True enough, Rufe. I agree with you it is hardly wise to mingle with these promiscuous side affairs, when the real work of our lifetime yet remains unbegun. We will get enough of adventures, I'm afraid, when we buck up against King Kirby in the struggle for that hidden treasure. So I'll heed your advice, pard, and put a check upon my temper in the future."

It was an hour after the spirited encounter between Headlight Harry and the boss bully of Fortune City, which had resulted so decidedly in the former's favor, and the Railroad Pards now reclined at length in the grateful shade beside the rough trail that led from the town up into the adjacent mountains. Losing no time in escaping from the admiring crowd that surged around them at the conclusion of the struggle, they had sought this sequestered spot on the outskirts of the town, to enjoy a brief rest ere resuming their round of investigation.

"Haw, haw! How you did sock it to that big chap, the Alligator, to be sure. Durned if my ribs ain't sore from the laughin' I done. Never enjoyed anything so much in my life as I did to

see you a-sendin' 'em in, left an' right, an' that overgrown galoot prancin' round like a mad-man, sawin' the air with his bony fists, an' never able to hit a good lick in return. Dog my cats if it wasn't a sight for sore eyes! Pard, I never knowed you could handle your dukes half so lively, afore. Ho, ho, ho! How you did line 'em out!"

And Rufe Ruffle laughed uproariously as he recalled the circumstances of that memorable scrimmage.

"Yes, pard; I fancy I gave that rum-soaked braggart a lesson that will last him the rest of his natural born days, and it was a piece of work in the performance of which I took the greatest satisfaction. But what became of the young woman who was the innocent cause of the commotion?"

"I opine she skedaddled the minnit that dirty blackguard took his paws off'n her. Leastwise, I ha'n't sot eyes on her since that identical minnit."

"What sort of a female was she, anyhow, Rufe? In my hurry and excitement I saw only that she was a woman, and cannot say for the life of me whether she was old or young, plain or handsome. Pray give me some enlightenment."

"Ho, ho! So you're interested in the female, eh?" laughed Rufe, facetiously. "Wal, I opine I ha'n't much wiser than yourself on that score, since I only got a brief glance at the fairy creature. I sh'u'd say, however, she was a gal of eighteen or twenty, pretty as a pictur', rather plainly dressed, an' from the free an' independent way in which she sassed that feller, an' afterwards snapped a shooter in his face, I reckon she's a genuine native."

"I should like to see her again, just out of curiosity. I wonder where she disappeared to so suddenly?"

"P'raps if ye want to see her real bad, ye kin engage a detective to ferret out her whereabouts," suggested the fireman, with a slight touch of sarcasm. "But, hold on! I reckon ye won't need to go to that trouble, for hyar she comes now, big as life an' twice as nat'ral. Look yonder, pard, an' behold the fair damsel whose acquaintance you are so desirous of making."

Sure enough, the fair subject of their conversation was approaching, tripping lightly along the rugged trail from the direction of the town. On her arm she still carried the basket, now heaped with a miscellaneous assortment of packages, evidently household supplies, and she bore the heavy burden as though it was but a featherweight.

As the girl drew nearer, the two wayside loiterers had an excellent opportunity of noting what wondrous charms of person she possessed. She was scarcely more than eighteen, slightly above medium height, with a form lithe and willowy and of exquisite proportions. Her features were remarkably clear-cut and beautiful; her eyes, black as jet, sparkled with wondrous luster; the rosy glow of youth and health suffused her cheeks. A wealth of lustrous, jetty hair fell unconfined to her waist.

The garb of this mountain beauty was simple in the extreme, consisting of a dress of coarse material that reached scarcely below her knees, fitting just closely enough to reveal the graceful contour of her form, Indian leggings and moccasins, fringed and beaded, protected her feet and limbs; while upon her head rested a jaunty cap, from which a handsome eagle's plume nodded saucily to the breeze. An ornamented belt engirdled her waist, and supported the dainty weapon with which she had pluckily attempted to shoot down the desperado.

Thus attired, the young girl presented a most picturesque appearance; and the Railroad Pards, feasting their eyes upon this glorious vision of female loveliness, felt they were in the presence of a veritable nymph of the mountains.

Humming a merry tune the maiden hurried on, and not until she arrived directly opposite the lounging-place of the two railroaders did she become aware of their proximity. The song abruptly ceased, and, an instant later, the look of surprise on the girl's fair face gave place to one of glad recognition; then, to the utter consternation of the pards, she advanced directly toward them.

The latter had not anticipated such a movement, and consequently were overwhelmed with embarrassment when they realized that this lovely mountain maid seemed bent on subjecting them to an interview; but they quickly arose from their recumbent position, doffed their hats, and courteously awaited her pleasure.

The young woman paused before them, glanced sharply from one to the other, and

finally settled her gaze upon the flushed face of Headlight Harry.

"I reckon as how you're the feller that wiped up the earth with that overgrown tough who calls hisself the Alligator, a short time ago?" she said, in an inquiring tone.

She spoke without regard to grammatical construction, did this pretty mountain maid, and her language sounded strangely uncouth and out of place; yet the voice that uttered it was singularly clear and bell-like.

"Yes, miss; I had the pleasure of polishing off the precious scoundrel you refer to," returned the engineer, in answer to her query. "You should have remained and seen how effectually your assailant was punished for his insolence. He will not repeat the act right away, I fancy."

"Oh, I was there, bet your life," declared the maid, with refreshing coolness. "'Tain't like me to skip off when there's any fun goin' on. Ye see, a friend o' mine chanced to live next door, so I took in the hull circus from a second-story window. Oh, but it was a beautiful sight to see you hammer that blamed galoot until he howled for mercy. Stranger, you've done me a right good turn, an' I appreciate it, you kin bet. That's why I stopped hyar, to thank you for your kindness; but I—I reckon I can't express myself well enough to do justice to my feelin's."

"No thanks are required, I assure you, miss. Like the gallant knights of old, my hand is ever ready to strike in defense of innocence and beauty in distress," laughed Headlight Harry.

"I reckon you wouldn't have needed to interfere if my shootin'-iron had only behaved itself," pursued the mountain houri. "I had a bead drawn on the Alligator's noddle-box, an' but for a defective cartridge, I reckon he'd be in the undertaker's care 'bout this time. I'm generally able to take keer o' myself, but this time I was mighty glad of a friend."

"And I am doubly glad that I happened along in time to be of service to you, especially since it has been the means of bringing about this pleasant interview," exclaimed the young engineer, gallantly. "My cup of happiness would be complete if I could but know the name of my charming acquaintance."

"My name? Why, don't you know?—I'm Wild Nell! I reckon you're a stranger here, fer ev'rybody 'round these parts knows Wild Nell."

"I am, indeed, a stranger in Fortune City, and I regret to say my knowledge of Wild Nell's existence dates from the present moment. But, if I may be so bold as to ask, where are you going with your heavy burden? Surely, there are no habitations in this direction," and the youth pointed up the precipitous mountain trail, with its dubious prospect of rocks and trees.

"Oh, yes; my home lies yonder—a good two miles up the gulch," replied the girl, with a smile. "I live with dad, ye know—he's a miner, an' I'm his housekeeper an' only companion since mother died, sev'ral years ago."

There was a momentary pause, and then she resumed:

"You say you are strangers in Fortune City—when did you arrive, if I may ask?"

"On last night's train from the East."

"So, then, you are tenderfeet, I reckon."

"I believe that is the sobriquet which your people apply to us unsophisticated fellows," smilingly admitted the engineer.

"Wal, stranger, you may be a tenderfoot, but I reckon you're no chicken. That fact is demonstrated by the handy way in which you done up the boss bruiser of Fortune City," was Wild Nell's compliment, inelegantly expressed.

"Do you know any one in this place?" she went on, with the air of one who is conducting a regular examination.

"Not a soul," was the ready answer.

"Then why, stranger—why do you come so shrewdly disguised?"

Suddenly, swiftly was this shot delivered—so suddenly that Headlight Harry could not repress a violent start. Glancing into Wild Nell's face, it was to feel her wondrous eyes piercing him through and through, and he knew that she had penetrated their secret.

A merry laugh pealed from the lips of the mountain maid, as she witnessed the surprise and consternation her speech had wrought.

"Ha, ha! That caught ye unawares, didn't it? Reckon ye felt secure in that stunnin' git-up; but ye couldn't deceive Wild Nell. No, sir-ee!"

"Great Scott! Girl, are you a clairvoyant or a witch?" cried the engineer, in amazement.

"Neither one nor t'other. Simply an ordinary, ev'ry-day gal, who knows how to use her eyes an' ears to good advantage. Your rig is all right in its way, mister, but your speech is what

gives ye dead away. When I first set eyes on yer phiz, I took ye to be a man of forty-five or thereabouts; but the minnit I heard yer voice I knew ye was at least twenty years younger. As for them beautiful whiskers o' yours, I reckon you got 'em ready-grown at the wig-maker's. Ha, ha, ha!"

Imagine the astonishment of the Railroad Pards at finding the disguise which they had deemed impenetrable thus readily discovered by this sharp-eyed mountain maid. They could only stare in mute bewilderment at the latter, as she went hurriedly on:

"Don't be alarmed 'cause I've penetrated your disguise, gents. Your secret is safe enuff with me. Plenty o' men come to town in disguise, an' they're usually of two classes—first, fugitives from justice, and second, detectives who are huntin' for the same. Now, I know you don't belong to the first class, so I s'pose you must be detectives. Reckon there's some poor, luckless galoot hidin' in these parts whom you are mighty anxious to find. Haven't I struck it right, stranger?"

There was just the slightest trace of anxiety in Wild Nell's voice, and the engineer did not fail to observe it. He began to suspect, now, that the girl's efforts to ascertain the object of their visit to Fortune City was prompted by some motive stronger than mere curiosity.

"Ah! my shrewd guesser, I fear you are at fault this time," he hastened to exclaim. "We are no more detectives than you are. We are staying in Fortune City but temporarily, since our ultimate destination lies further beyond, and to-morrow at this time will find us miles away. So if, by chance, you have any relatives or acquaintances who are expecting a call from Pinkerton's bloodhounds, I trust these few words of explanation will serve to set your mind at rest, so far as we are concerned."

Headlight Harry keenly watched the girl's face while speaking, and, when he saw her start and slightly change color at his well-directed shot, it was to feel that his suspicions were not without foundation. Wild Nell, however, immediately recovered her usual self-possession.

"Wal, stranger, hope ye aren't mad 'cause I've asked so many fool questions," said she, half-apologetically. "Ye know it's a woman's nature to be inquisitive, an' I reckon I'm no exception to the rule."

"No offense, I assure you, miss. Indeed, I am most happy to gratify your curiosity; and if there are any more questions that you have in mind, don't hesitate to propound them at once. I will answer to the best of my ability."

The mountain maid laughed merrily.

"Oh, I reckon my curiosity is about satisfied, now. Thank ye, just the same, stranger. An' now I guess I must be goin', cause it's gettin' late, an' dad 'll have a fit if he comes home an' finds supper isn't ready. Wal, so long, gents! I won't forget the favor ye've done me in a hurry, an' if ever you tenderfeet get into trouble, remember Wild Nell's your friend, an' mebbe she can find a way of helpin' ye out. Good-by!"

And then with a careless wave of her hand, the mountain sprite tripped lightly away, her elfin laugh floating back to their ears of the two young fellows who stood regretfully watching her departure. In silence they watched the receding form until it disappeared from view, the eagle plume in her jaunty cap nodding a saucy farewell as she vanished within the forest shade.

"Well, Rufe, what do you think of our fair acquaintance?" inquired the engineer, at length recovering his speech.

"Did you ever dream of encountering so beautiful a being in this wild and inhospitable locality?"

"What do I think of her? Why, dog my cats, that's only one thing to think, an' that is she's the gol-darnedest, all-firedest, daintiest, prettiest leetle piece of caliker that ever walked on two feet. That's what I think! An' I kin lick seventeen kinds o' stuffin' outen the first feller wot dares to say she isn't," was the startling manner in which Rufe Ruffle gave vent to his long pent-up enthusiasm.

"A reg'lar angel in petticoats," he went on, "an' sharper 'n a steel-trap, to boot. Did ye see how quick she was on to our disguise? Jerusalem! I was clean gone paralyzed when she sprung it on us so sudden like."

"And, too, did you notice how anxious she appeared to ascertain our errand in Fortune City, and how relieved she seemed to find that we were not the redoubtable man-hunters she mistook us to be? I rather suspect that some of her acquaintances—her father, perhaps—have

good reason to fear the detectives' visit, and regard for their welfare was what prompted so many questions. However, be that as it may, the girl is unquestionably a dandy, and I hope it will be our good fortune to meet her again."

Rufe Ruffle suddenly faced about and laid a heavy hand upon his comrade's arm.

"See hyar, pard!" he exclaimed, abruptly.

"Well, Rufe?"

"You an' me are chums, ar'n't we?"

"Certainly."

"An' have b'en for years?"

"I reckon so."

"An' you've got a gal at home, which same you're engaged to be hitched to—isn't that a fact?"

"It is, Rufe. But what on earth are you driving at, old man?"

"Jest this, pard. You know your duty, an' I reckon you're man enuff to follow it. If there's any sparkin' to be done round these parts, I'm the very identical chap wot's goin' to do it. Understand?"

The young fireman's voice had a determined ring, and Headlight Harry stared at him for a moment in mute amazement. Then, as the light dawned upon his mind, he burst into a hearty laugh.

"Ha, ha! I begin to see which way the wind blows," he exclaimed. "Why, Rufe, old fellow, what's come over you so suddenly? You are the chap who has always professed to be a confirmed misogynist."

"A what?"

"A misogynist,—woman-hater, you know."

Rufe scratched his head for a moment in perplexity, then answered in tones of dogged determination:

"So I did, pard, I'll admit. Howsumdever, I opine there's no law in the land that kin prevent a fellow from alterin' his opinions, in case he takes a notion. At any rate, pard, if I should ever decide to shove my head into the matrimonial yoke, I reckon Wild Nell represents jest the article I want to tie to. Them's my sentiments, eggsactly!"

CHAPTER IX.

TRAPPED.

As the Railroad Pards continued their peregrinations through the streets of Fortune City, it was to find that their fame had already preceded them. The story of the attempted train-robbery had gained immediate circulation, and there were plenty to recognize the heroes of that occasion and point them out to others. Then, too, the news of the boss bruiser's disastrous defeat at the hands of Headlight Harry had traveled with lightning rapidity, and served to intensify public interest in the indomitable young strangers. Thus it was that the Railroad Pards, as they wandered from place to place, soon found themselves the cynosure of all eyes.

Among the first to accost them was the railroad station-agent, who exhibited a telegram from the management directing him to ascertain the names and addresses of the men who had been instrumental in saving the Western Express from robbery. Scarcely had he disappeared when the Wells, Fargo & Co.'s local agent appeared on the scene, bent on a similar errand. These incidents were not without a certain suggestiveness, which was by no means lost upon the young railroaders.

"Pard, I reckon that means somethin'," Rufe Ruffle knowingly declared, as the Express agent blithely departed with the desired information. "These railroad an' Express fellers seem so all-fired anxious to locate us that I shouldn't be at all surprised to see 'em open their generous hearts an' cum down with a dollar or two, jest by way of recompense for services rendered."

"Pshaw! Let them keep their rewards, if it's really their intention to offer any," replied Headlight Harry, with a scornful gesture. "Remember, Rufus, we have a cool million in prospect, and can afford to laugh at the alleged generosity of a niggardly corporation."

"That's all well enuff, pard; but I reckon ye've forgot the good old saw that says 'a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.' That million in prospect is yet a good ways off, an' I reckon it's a good scheme to catch on to all the leetle things that's flyin' 'round loose. I, for one, am out for the stuff, ev'ry time; an' if anybody has a reward to offer, I reckon yer uncle is jest the chap to gobble it up without a second asking."

At the very next corner, the pards were waylaid by a seedy individual who introduced himself as the representative of the "Daily Screech Owl," and who declared that his mis-

sion was to secure a detailed description of the late attempted robbery from the lips of the participants, themselves, for publication in the evening edition of that enterprising sheet. From previous experiences with the ubiquitous reporter, the victims felt that the only way to get rid of this interesting specimen would be to comply with his request; and soon, therefore, the seedy youth departed, profusely voicing his thanks, and promising that the article should appear in the finest style the "Screech Owl" could command, accompanied by flaring headlines and original wood-cuts.

Nor did the series of interruptions end there, for hardly had the newspaper fiend gone his way when a burly specimen of the genus native, nearly seven feet high, bronzed, bewhiskered, and armed to the teeth, suddenly interposed his gigantic form as a barrier to all further progress.

"Hold on, thar, pards!" I opine you're the very galoots I've b'en a-kin' all over town to find," was the loud salutation of this formidable individual, as he towered like a living monument above the Railroad Pard; while the latter surveyed his huge proportions with a feeling somewhat akin to anxiety, vaguely wondering if a second "Alligator" affray would be the outcome of the interview.

"Well, I reckon you're only about the forty-leventh individual who has come on a similar errand within the past two hours," returned Headlight Harry, cheerfully. "And now, having found us at last, my friend, in what way can we serve you best?"

The answer that was forthcoming speedily set their minds at rest as to whether the newcomer's mission was warlike or peaceful.

"How kin ye serve me, eh? Why, simply by 'lowin' me the priv'lege o' graspin' your good right han's, pards," and, as he spoke, the stranger thrust out his own huge, hairy paw. "Lemme introduce myself, gents, 'thout further ceremony. I'm Big Hank Hawkins, chief o' the Fortune City Law an' Order League, an' while I'm a purty tough cuss to look at, you'll find thar ha'n't a squarer man in camp, if I do tell it myself. Come, pards,—shake!"

And the pards did shake, without a moment's hesitation, for they quickly sized the giant up as an honest, good-natured fellow, whose redoubtable appearance was by no means to be taken as an index to his true character.

"Hang me for a hoss-thief, pards, if I hain't tickled to death to make yer acquaintance," continued Big Hank, evincing a genuine satisfaction in this opportune meeting. "D'ye see, I've b'en away for some days, an' when I sailed inter town this afternoon, the fust thing that greeted my ears was the story o' last night's scrimmage; an' when I heard that the heroes o' the occasion were still in Fortune City, I immediately set out to trail 'em down, determined not to rest until I had grasped their han's, an' tole 'em in plain United States how highly I appreciate their efforts. Pards, your recent work has not only proved a blessing to the hull community in general, but has b'en a reg'lar godsend to the Law an' Order League."

"Indeed?"

"The avowed purpose o' the Law an' Order League," went on Big Hank, "is to keep the morals o' Fortune City in tol'able good trim, an' raise holy blazes with all evil-doers in gen'ral; but ever since our organization, some time a-back, our efforts hev b'en directed principally ag'in' the very identical gang w'ot ye had the pleasure o' buckin' ag'in' last night. This gang, ye understand, is located somewheres up in the mountings, yonder—only Old Nick hisself knows jest whar; an' the way they've b'en up to their hellish work o' late is well kalkerlated to make us alleged Regulators feel mighty sore, since, strive as we may, we've never yet b'en able to do anything effectual ag'in' 'em."

"Howsumdover, when we sot eyes on the dead outlaws w'ot was brought in on the train last night, somethin' like a suspicion o' the truth begun to crawl inter our durn thick skulls, for we recognized in the cadavers sev'ral well-known characters o' Fortune City. We've reached the conclusion, therefore, that the hull darn gang is composed o' feller cits whom we had hitherto failed to suspect; an' I reckon 't won't be long now afore we've nailed the hull caboodle an' wiped 'em out, which happy result, gents, 'll all be owin' to your own han'some work, in thus furnishin' us with such a vallyble clew."

"We are extremely glad to learn that we have been of so great service to your league," Headlight Harry hastened to say, when at length there came a break in the long-winded utterance of the giant. "It is, indeed, flattering to

receive such unstinted praise, believing as we do that it is honestly and sincerely expressed; but, really, I fear you are inclined to overestimate our services, as you see fit to call it."

"Not much, pard! I reckon as how Big Hank knows w'ot he's a-talkin' about, an' he don't make a practice o' bestowin' his praise whar it ain't merited. I tell ye, pards, ole Webster's bookshunary don't contain words enuff to properly express the gratitude o' the Law and Order League; an' I reckon the hull town's yourn as long as ye keer to keep it. But say, I've got some important biz to 'tend to, an' I opine I'll hev to tear myself away. Afore I vamoose, thar's a little favor I'd like to ask o' ye."

"Name it, friend."

"Wal, ye see, the Law an' Order League holds a special meetin' ter-night, right in that hall which ye kin see yonder; an' I kinder imagine nothin' would tickle the boys better'n to see ye two gents occupyin' seats of honor on the front platform. So ye'll drop in for a few minutes, won't ye, pards—jest for to obleege yer humble servant?"

"Nothing could give us more pleasure, I assure you," was the engineer's ready reply; whereat the giant native fairly pranced in delight.

"Hooray! That's the way to talk, pards. The boys'll be tickled to death to meet ye; an' I've only to pass the word 'round that ye'r comin' to insure a full attendance. Now, don't forgit the place, pards, an' the hour is eight o'clock, sharp. Jest call for me at the door, an' I'll waltz ye in an' do the grand introduction act."

After a few moments more spent in giving further utterance to his voluminous thoughts, Big Hank finally took his departure; and the Railroad Pard were once more left to follow their own inclinations.

Their meeting with the burly chief of the Vigilantes had proven a very pleasant surprise. Big Hank Hawkins, uncouth and rough-mannered though he might be, was undoubtedly as honest and upright as he was brave, a personage of no little local importance, and one whose friendship was not to be despised—especially in this wild and perilous region, where the value of a true friend could scarcely be overestimated. Realizing this, the pards were nothing loth to cultivate the giant's acquaintance; and consequently the hour of eight found them at the appointed place, having passed the intervening time without further adventure.

Big Hank was on the lookout for his expected guests, and greeted them in his usual vociferous fashion.

"Hello! Hyar ye air, right on time, I see. Waltz right in, pards, an' make yerselves to home. The boys air out in full force to-night, an' they're all a-dyin' to scrape yer acquaintance."

And accordingly the Railroad Pard were ushered into the presence of the Law and Order League.

The building in which this noted organization was wont to assemble, and which Big Hank had dignified by the name of "hall," was a roomy, one-story frame structure, located in a quiet street at the very edge of Fortune City. There were no other houses in the immediate vicinity, and, save for the assembling Regulators, the street was quite deserted, even at this early hour.

Within, however, a far more animated picture was presented. The "hall" comprised one large, roughly-finished room, in which nearly two-score bronzed and bearded men were now congregated. Some stretched at ease on chairs and benches; others leaned carelessly against the walls. Those who were not chewing the "weed" were smoking it, and the atmosphere was heavy with the fumes of vile tobacco. A busy hum of conversation pervaded the hall, interspersed with loud laughter and not infrequent oaths; but all this quickly ceased when Big Hank appeared escorting his famous guests.

A shout of recognition greeted the Railroad Pard as they meekly followed their guide to the narrow platform which occupied one end of the room. Dropping into the chairs already placed there for their use, the young railroaders looked interestedly upon the scene, meeting with composure the battery of two-score pairs of curious eyes now focused upon them.

Rough and uncouth in garb and manner, the personal appearance of the men comprising the Law and Order League was scarcely calculated to impress the casual observer favorably; yet, a more honest, bold and energetic set of fellows never existed than these self-appointed guardians of the public peace. Their purpose was most praiseworthy—their zeal indefatigable; and if

the League had failed to accomplish anything noteworthy during its brief but turbulent existence, the result was chiefly owing to hard luck, and by no means to any remissness on the part of its members.

The Railroad Pard, quick to estimate the worth of these bold, rough-and-ready Westerners, could not fail to appreciate the opportunity thus given for making their acquaintance; and this feeling, needless to say, was fully reciprocated, since the presence of the strangers was largely responsible for this unusually full attendance.

"Feller-citizens an' brethren o' the Law and Order League, kindly hush yer blamed babblin' an' hearken unto me, for I've got somethin' mighty important to communicate."

It was the strident voice of Big Hank that suddenly cleft the air, as with heavy tread he strode upon the platform, his huge frame towering high above the audience. The renewed shuffle of feet and hum of excited voices now ceased as if by magic, while all stood in a state of eager expectancy.

"Pards," the giant quickly continued, "afore we commence the reg'lar bizness o' the evening, I wish to call yer undivided attention to the illustrious gents who have so kindly consented to grace this occasion with their august presence, an' who are at this minnit occupyin' seats of honor on this hyer platform, right afore yer eyes. You've all heard o' 'em already, pards—who in Fortune City has not? An' now I take great pleasure in introducin' ye to the bold young strangers who, I'm ashamed to admit, have done more toward wipin' out that pesky outlaw gang in one short hour than the hull united Law an' Order League has accomplished during the entire period of its existence."

With a melodramatic flourish Big Hank concluded his oratorical effort, and instantly there arose from two-score lusty throats a cheer, loud and terrific, that threatened to lift the very roof from the rickety building. And as round after round of applause ascended skyward, the Railroad Pard stood with lifted hats, meekly bowing their acknowledgments.

This, however, failed to satisfy the enthusiastic Westerners. Nothing less than an address would meet their ideas, as was evinced by the cries of "Speech! speech!" that assailed the guests from every side.

"Now, neither of the Railroad Pard laid claim to oratorical powers, and, being taken utterly by surprise, they stood dismayed amid the chorus of excited cries, exchanging imploring glances, and each waiting for the other to assume the initiative.

"I reckon that means you, pard," Rufe Ruffle whispered, cautiously. "You're the boss talk-slinger o' this outfit, so jest step out an' give 'em a little taffy. Reckon 't won't take much to please 'em. Brace up, now, old man, an' have some style about ye!"

Though scarcely less frustrated than his companion, Headlight Harry nerved himself for the ordeal and advanced to the edge of the platform. A final cheer greeted this movement, then the exuberant crowd lapsed into silence.

"Gentlemen of Fortune City—"

Thus bravely began the engineer, but whether or not he would have made a success of his impromptu speech will never be known, for even as the first words passed his lips there came a most surprising interruption.

A strange voice suddenly pierced the air, out-ringing loud and clear:

"Ho, within there! Up with yer han's, ev'ry mother's son o' ye, or we'll blow ye all inter Kingdom Come! Look alive, now!"

And then it was that the members of the Law and Order League made a most alarming discovery.

The room in which they sat was exceedingly well lighted, having several spacious windows on either side, as well as at the rear end behind the platform; and, the night being oppressively warm, all these were open wide. Now, as the occupants looked up in surprise at that brisk command, it was to find each window-sill fairly bristling with rifle-barrels, while in the background could be distinguished the faintly outlined figures of the masked men who held these instruments of death.

"Han's up, I say, you durn galoots! Get a move on, lively 'now, or off goes yer noddle-boxes!"

There was no need of a second repetition of this stern command. Caught like rats in a trap, with a score of deadly rifles staring them in the face, ready to belch forth their leaden contents at the first show of resistance, the men of Fortune City were sensible enough to see that

there was but one course left to follow. Forty pairs of hands, therefore, went skyward with an alacrity that was truly laughable, the movement being accompanied by a volley of curses from the disgusted victims.

"Ho, ho, ho! What an interestin' pictur' ye present, I do declare," came the unknown voice from without. "Who'd 'a' thought sich a smart crowd'd allow themselves to git caught so slick? Shoot me, if the sight hain't enuff to make a jackass laff out loud! Why, it's in our power to wipe out the hull Law an' Order League, an' not leave so much as a grease-spot o' the hull caboodle."

"Blaze away, then, cuss ye!" howled Big Hank, unable to suppress his anger and vexation. "It's no more'n ter be expected from sich a 'tarnal set o' sneaks. Ye dassn't put down them shooters for a jiffy, an' give us half a fightin' chance."

"Keep cool, Hank—don't excite yerself," came the complacent retort. "We hain't out for scalps to-night, so ye needn't feel anxious about yer own. We've simply got a leetle duty to perform; after which your precious League is free to continue its routine, so far as we are concerned."

"That's good news, I swear. So the quicker ye do that leetle duty, as ye call it, an' take yer ugly carcasses out o' hyar, the better it'll suit us. Come, now, who the blazes are ye, an' what are ye after?"

"To the first question, none o' yer durn bizness. To the second, we are after the two galoots standin' thar by yer side. Sorry, indeed, to rob ye of yer honored guests; but the fact is we've got a prior claim on their sassiety, so opine they'll hev to come along with us."

Imagine the consternation of the Railroad Pards when these ominous words fell upon their ears! They were standing side by side on the platform, but a few feet from the open window; and, even as the unknown leader of the masks ceased speaking, a rope was suddenly cast through the opening so adroitly that the ample noose settled over both men and tightened about their waists. One quick, powerful jerk sent them reeling backward, and in another moment they were dragged bodily through the window and into the open air.

So swiftly and adroitly was this maneuver executed that the pards had not the slightest chance to offer resistance. Indeed, they had scarcely begun to realize what was taking place ere they found themselves powerless in the hands of their captors.

Suddenly, now, the men with the rifles disappeared, and immediately afterward the sound of rapid hoof-beats told that the marauders were riding away. No sooner was that dreaded rifle-battery removed than Big Hank's party rushed for the door, drawing their own weapons as they ran; but when they reached the open air it was too late to aid the luckless pards.

The dim forms of the masked marauders could be distinguished, barely a hundred yards away, riding recklessly from the town; but, though within easy range, not a shot was fired for fear of hitting their captive friends. The Vigilantes could only curse in impotent rage, listen to the fast-dying hoof-beats that now marked the course of the audacious unknowns, as they dashed swiftly toward the neighboring foot-hills, bearing the Railroad Pards in their midst.

CHAPTER X.

DOOMED TO DEATH.

"Well, Rufe, what d'ye thing of think of the situation? Neither pleasant nor comfortable, is it, old man?"

"I reckon 't isn't any worse than I expected, pard. I prophesied that sooner or later we'd be runnin' our durn necks into a noose; but hang me if the time hain't come a blamed sight sooner than I expected."

"You will hardly venture to assert, however, that it was our own meddlesomeness that got us into difficulty, this time. Certainly it is through no fault of ours that we are lying here in this out of the way place, trussed up like a couple of turkeys all ready for the cook's oven."

It was a wild and desolate spot in the very heart of the mountains. Barren walls of rock rose high on every side, encompassing the narrow canyon, and throwing fantastic shadows where the light of early morning had scarce yet penetrated. A natural depression in the rocky wall here formed a sort of cave, in which the luckless Railroad Pards now lay, bound securely hand and foot, with the hard earth for a pillow and the overarching rock for a canopy.

Nor were they quite alone in this desolate place, for several yards away and directly opposite the cavesat a burly masked ruffian, reclining at ease against a boulder and puffing away at a dirty pipe with an air of supreme satisfaction. A rifle rested across his knees, ready for instant use, while despite his apparent indifference, a pair of keen eyes kept careful and unremitting watch upon the prisoners. Should the latter succeed in slipping their bonds, a feat that was well-nigh impossible, this trusty watch-dog threatened to make short work of any attempt to escape.

For long and weary hours the two railroaders had lain in the same uncomfortable position in which we find them. Unable to move hand or foot, with the tight cords cutting into their flesh, and sore all over from the numerous bumps and bruises received during that desperate night's ride from Fortune City, theirs was a situation scarcely conducive to physical comfort. Nor was their mental condition in any way an improvement upon their bodily discomforts.

"Dog my cats, pard, if this hyar hain't gittin' a leetle monotonous," was Rufe Ruffle's sorry lament, as he laboriously turned over and over in vain search for a softer patch of earth on which to repose his aching frame. "I wish we'd had sense enuff to keep away from that thar Law an' Order League's fandango. I reckon we wouldn't be hyar, now, in this durned ridiculous plight."

"Don't be so sure of that, my boy. I imagine these unknown gents with the masks would never have rested until they discovered our whereabouts, wheresoever we might have chanced to be, since their sole purpose in entering Fortune City seems to have been to effect our capture. Under more favorable circumstances, however, I fancy the scoundrels would have found us hard customers to handle. As it is, I feel like kicking myself when I think how neatly we were entrapped."

"'Twasn't no fault of ours, I reckon. We'd give 'em a warm reception if they'd only give us half a chance; but the blamed varmints wuz too sharp for that, so hyar we are, an' I opine thar's no use cryin' over spilt milk. The next thing is to ascertain our whereabouts, as well as the identity o' the gentlemen to whose extreme kindness we owe this delightful leetle pleasure excursion."

"There's little doubt in my mind as to the latter question," declared Headlight Harry, promptly. "I believe our present captors are identical with the train-robbers whom we had the pleasure of thrashing last evening. Indeed, who else in this locality could desire our capture bad enough to go to such desperate measures?"

"I reckon you're about right, pard," agreed the fireman. "An' now the question arises, what do the pesky varmints intend to do with us poor devils, now that they've got us nicely corraled?"

"Revenge is their object, without a doubt. As to what particular means they will employ to accomplish their purpose, that remains for the future alone to determine. In our present helpless position, it only remains for us to meekly await our captors' pleasure."

"Shoot me if I hain't gettin' tired o' waitin' for the varmints to come back. Say, pard, what's the matter with tackling that black galoot out yonder? I'm jest a-dyin' for information, an' mebbe our masked friend 'll condescend to enlighten us a bit."

"All right. Open fire on the fellow, Rufe. It won't do any harm, though probably all the points you get out of him won't pay for your waste of breath."

Rufe Ruffle immediately hailed the stalwart sentry.

"I say, out there, Mister Man-who-hides-his-face, if ye haven't any pertickler objections I'd like to fire a few questions in your vicinity."

A surly growl answered him.

"What the blazes d'ye want?" the masked man curtly demanded.

"Only a leetle information, my festive friend an' feller-citizen. Firstly, what's the geographical location o' this place? Secondly, who are the blamed galoots w'ot brought us hyar? Thirdly, where have they gone ter, now? Fourthly, when d'ye expect 'em back? an' fifthly, w'ot are they goin' to do with us when they do get back? By answerin' these questions, mister, ye will confer a great favor, an' furnish consid'able relief for two inquisitive minds."

The sentinel deliberately rose, strode a few paces nearer, then brought his rifle to a level and carefully drew a bead upon the loquacious speaker.

"Look ye, young feller," he snarled, fiercely, "if ye take me for a walkin' information bureau

I opine ye've made a big mistake. Now, lemme give ye a pointer! When the boss left me hyar, he says, says he: 'If these two galoots try to escape, or even bother ye with their cheap talk, I opine 'twould be a good scheme to clip off an ear or two, or mebbe a nose, jest to keep 'em quiet, ye know, an' at the same time afford yerself a leetle innocent amusement.' Now, I reckon I've got to obey orders; an' the next time ye open yer mouth ter me 'll be the signal to begin the music. Durned if I hain't itchin' to take a shot at them lop ears o' yourn, stranger. Which one dy'e prefer to have off first?"

The masked ruffian impatiently fingered his weapon as he spoke, while the way he squinted along the glittering tube seemed to betoken a speedy commencement of the proposed rifle practice. The Railroad Pards, however, immediately recognized this warlike demonstration as nothing more or less than a very palpable bluff; yet at the same time they were convinced that it was impossible to gain any information from their guard, and consequently no further attempt was made in that direction.

Nothing remained but to patiently await developments; and this proved an exceedingly arduous task to the anxious young railroaders. Afflicted both in body and spirit, they endured a most uncomfortable existence, each moment seeming of an hour's duration to their tortured minds.

It was a vast relief, therefore, when at length footsteps were heard, indicating the re-approach of the band; for, even though the latter's return was more than likely to produce unpleasant results, it would at least serve to relieve the torturing suspense which was now fast becoming unendurable.

With illy concealed eagerness the Railroad Pards watched the returning marauders as they came abruptly upon the scene. They numbered fully a score—all stalwart, muscular fellows, whose belts fairly bristled with weapons. They still wore the somber masks, but were now minus their horses—a fact that led the watchful captives to surmise that the gang possessed a camp somewhere in the immediate vicinity.

"Wal, pard, we're back again at last," saluted he who seemed to be the leader. "Glad to see ye've kept the pris'ners safe durin' our protracted absence."

"Ay, cap'n; that was an easy 'nuff job, I reckon," responded the sentry, as he lazily arose and stretched himself with a prodigious yawn. "I'm mighty glad to see ye back, 'cause this kind o' duty is gettin' altogether too tiresome to suit my notion. What the deuce kept ye away so long, cap'n?"

"Oh, it took us some time to decide how to dispose o' these precious youths. Some wanted one thing an' some wanted another, but we've finally come to an agreement, an' I opine we'll now relieve ye o' further duty. Come, boys, gather up the gentle lambs, an' let's be off. We've got lots of important biz on the docket, so it behooves us to get this leetle job over with as soon as possible."

Willing hands seized the prisoners in obedience to the chief's command, and the entire party moved hurriedly away, bearing the luckless railroaders in their midst.

Every word of this brief conversation was plainly audible to the attentive prisoners; and, while the speech of the masked leader conveyed no definite idea of their future fate, yet it was clothed with a certain grim suggestiveness that could not fail to increase their doubt and uneasiness.

The Railroad Pards were not to be kept much longer in suspense, however, for after traveling for perhaps ten minutes along the rugged trail, the giant chief abruptly called a halt.

"Right hyar's the identical place, boys," he gleefully exclaimed, "an' I opine thar ha'n't a spot in the hull durned Rockies that's more suitable for our purpose."

A wilder and more desolate scene could scarcely be imagined than that which now unfolded itself to the wondering gaze of the captives. Here the trail narrowed until it became but a mere shelf projecting from the precipitous side of the mountain wall. On one side it formed the brink of a yawning chasm, which plunged down, down to an unknown depth; while beyond and on every hand grim, up-towering walls of rock shut in the scene, casting a perpetual shadow over all. A faint glimpse of cerulean blue, far above the lofty cliffs, formed the single bright spot in this cold and cheerless prospect.

The young railroaders felt their fears rapidly increase as they viewed their wild surroundings. For what purpose, indeed, could they have been brought to such a dismal spot? All too soon was

the question answered, for the grim leader now suddenly faced his prisoners, a demoniac light dancing in his eyes.

"Wal, my gentle lambs, hyer we are at last on the scene of execution, an' the boys are all impatient for the fun to begin; but, afore we proceed with the circus, I reckon I kin spare time to spout a few words just by the way o' preliminaries. In course ye'r both a thirstin' for enlightenment on the subject, an' I opine 'twould be a 'tarnal shame ter send sich a good-lookin' pair o' youngsters off to Kingdom Come, without introducin' ourselves an' explainin' why we are forced to resort to sich desprit measures."

"As regards the introduction, Mister Man, I reckon none is necessary, since I already recognize your voice as that of the ruffian who, as Thunderbolt Tommy, figured quite prominently in a certain episode two nights since," was Headlight Harry's quick retort. "As for your precious associates, I surmise they are identical with the gang that aided you in the attempt to rob the Night Express, but who, I am happy to say, failed most ignominiously in that dastardly undertaking."

"Oh, ho! So ye recognize me, hey?" laughed the masked leader. "I reckon, then, 'twon't need much explanation on my part to make ye understand what ye'r hyar for. It was owin' entirely to yer cussed meddlesomeness that we missed a neat bit o' plunder that night, an' I opine we're not the boys to forgit the debt we owed ye in a hurry—no, sir-ee! So while ye were struttin' around Fortune City like a couple o' young fightin' cocks, exultin' in yer wonderful exploits, us chaps was busy to work on the dead quiet, arrangin' to rope ye in. I reckon ye'll allow we made a mighty clean job of it, stranger; for hyar ye are, caught like rats in a trap, an' meekly awaitin' the pleasure o' yours truly. Haw, haw, haw!"

"I must acknowledge you caught us very neatly; but, now that we are your prisoners, what do you propose to do with us? That is the question that is agitating our minds just at present."

"Ha, ha! Now we're comin' down to the p'int, for sure. Of course ye can't expect to be set free after committin' sich a serious offense ag'in' our band. When we first clapped paws on ye, it was a foregone conclusion that ye'd got ter pass in yer checks. The only question with us was what mode of punishment would best suit the crime for which we hold ye guilty. The boys had more'n a dozen suggestions to make, an' it took us some time to decide, but I reckon we've now hit on the proper thing. D'ye see this chasm, stranger?"

"We're not blind, surely."

"Wal, folks hereabouts call it the Devil's Jumpoff. They say it has no bottom, but goes straight down to Old Nick's domains. Now, we're a-goin' to send ye both down inter that hole on a voyage o' diskivery, jest to prove or disprove the kerrectness o' that theory. How will that tickle yer notion, gents, for a leeble pleasure excursion?"

The Railroad Pard could only stare at the speaker in unutterable horror. Surely, none but a fiend could plan and execute so diabolical a deed! The next moment convinced them that the outlaw chief was terribly in earnest.

In obedience to a signal, the masked ruffians sprung to work with a readiness that showed every detail of this dastardly scheme to be carefully pre-arranged. The two railroaders were first bound back to back, three separate pieces of rope being employed for this purpose. One of these was fastened under their armpits; another encircled their waists and effectually pinioned their arms; the third was used to secure their ankles. Then around the first-named cord was passed the end of a strong rope, this being secured in a long loop so contrived that the men thus fastened might be suspended in an exactly perpendicular position.

"Ye see, gents, we're bound to do this job in proper fashion," explained the robber chief, while these ominous preparations were in progress. "Of course the quickest way out of it 'd be to throw ye over the cliff without ceremony; but I opine that 'd prove too much of a shock to yer sensitive nerves. So we'll jest drop ye over an' let ye hang awhile, so's to give ye a sorter chance to prepare for the final plunge."

The loose end of the rope was securely fastened to a projecting spur of rock, and then, all being in readiness, the luckless young railroaders were lowered over the dizzy brink as far as the length of the rope would permit.

The masked leader laughed aloud in fiendish glee as he viewed this operation.

"Ha, ha! How d'ye feel now, down there?"

he exclaimed. "Reckon ye feel like cussin' the day when ye were durn fools enuff to incur the wrath of this hyar gang. Ha, ha! Revenge is sweet!"

"Now, then, my innocent lambs, jest hearken to yer fate! With this knife I'm a-goin' to cut the rope jest half in two. The remainder will part slowly, strand by strand, under the heavy strain. It'll take time to do that—possibly half an hour or more; an' that'll give ye a chance to meditate on yer past wickedness, an' pray for future salvation."

"Farewell, now, my precious heroes! I can not linger longer near you. Hope you will have a pleasant journey! Give my best respects to Old Harry, when you meet him; an' don't forget to write an' tell us how ye like the climate down thar. And now, my friends, adieu—a long adieu!"

As the chief moved away, accompanied by his satellites, his hoarse laughter, floating back with startling distinctness on the morning air, fell like the knell of doom upon the ears of the Railroad Pard as they swung slowly to and fro 'twixt heaven and earth, suspended by a mere thread that threatened at any moment to break and send them headlong into eternity!

CHAPTER XI.

VICTORY.

SLOWLY to and fro swung the two luckless victims of outlaw vengeance, their pinioned bodies hanging in shadowy silhouette against the grim, gray wall. Above, and on every side, great towering masses of rock; below, a black and fathomless abyss, shrouded in a gloom deep and impenetrable.

Silence, profound and deathlike, pervaded the solemn scene.

"Pard!"

It was the sepulchral voice of Rufe Ruffle that suddenly broke the awful stillness.

"Yes, Rufe."

"I reckon we're in an orful fix—"

"Decidedly so."

"An' there's no earthly chance o' gettin' out of it, eh?"

"I'm afraid not, Rufe," was Headlight Harry's doleful reply.

"In a few minnits, more or less, this rope will break, an' then we'll drop plumb down inter nothingness. Gee-whillikin! What a prospect! Now, pard, ye kin see what our durn fool meddlesomeness has brought us to. If we'd minded our own bizness I reckon we wouldn't be hyar now, preparin' for the grand tumble act."

"Rather, pard, go back to the primary cause, and say that, had we not entered upon the search for Gideon Goff's millions, we would now be quietly running old Number Nine, and our present misfortunes would never have overtaken us. Heigh-ho! I fancy King Kirby will enjoy a walk-over, now, in the race for the hidden treasure. Judging by present indications, we are permanently out of it."

"Durn the hidden treasure, say I! King Kirby's welcome to it, or any other galoot wot's lucky enuff to find it. As for me, only let me plant these two good hoofs o' mine on terry-firmer, an' see how quick I'd cut sticks for home. No more treasure-huntin' in mine, please. Say, pard," he continued, after a momentary pause, "how deep d'ye s'pose this durn hole is, anyway?"

"That's a question that will be answered all too soon, I'm afraid," returned the engineer, sadly. "Ha! What was that?"

Only a light, almost imperceptible tremor of the rope; yet, it was fraught with terrible significance to the Railroad Pard, swinging there above that unfathomable abyss. It told them all too plainly that another strand had parted,—that there was one less link in the fragile chain that separated them from eternity! Soon, alas! would the remaining strands follow, one by one, until the last slight thread was severed,—and then—?

The very thought inspired the luckless youths with horror. No longer did they attempt to converse, for their thoughts were too deep for utterance. In utter silence they hung there against the somber side of the cliff, suspended by a mere thread between life and death, filled with an inexpressible terror that only increased as the moments went slowly by.

But hark! Was that not the sound of footsteps on the rocky shelf above? Whose voice was that which, an instant later, was wafted to their eager ears?

"Hello, below there! Keep your courage up, pards, for I'm a-goin' to save ye."

The effect of these cheering words was fairly electrical. Hope leaped buoyantly into the breasts of the helpless captives where once had reigned doubt and despair.

"Make haste, then, for Heaven's sake!" shouted Headlight Harry, imploringly. "The rope which holds us has been cut, and it won't last much longer."

"Never fear, pard! Keep cool, an' rely on me. I'll have ye out of that in about three shakes of a lamb's tail," came the assuring response, and then for a moment silence reigned again.

Who was this friend in need?—surely the voice sounded strangely familiar? And now, having discovered the pards, by what means did the new-comer propose to extricate them from their dangerous position? Did he fully comprehend the many difficulties attending this undertaking? Eagerly, breathlessly, in a state of commingled hope and fear, they awaited the further movements of their would-be rescuer.

Nor had they long to wait. A long, slender rope-ladder was suddenly dropped over the cliff, falling within a foot of the suspended railroaders; and in an another instant the stranger came running down this swaying structure with cat-like activity.

Headlight Harry, whose face was turned toward the new-comer, instantly gave vent to a cry of amazement, for he saw that the latter was a woman, and even in that dim, uncertain light it required but a single glance to recognize the form and features of Wild Nell, the mountain beauty.

This, however, was no time for explanations; and, without a word, Wild Nell went quickly to work with the confident air of one who fully comprehended the situation, and was well prepared to overcome every difficulty.

She carried in one hand a long, rawhide lasso, the noose of which she passed up over the limbs of the two men and drew taut about their waists, standing, meantime, on the lowermost round of the rope-ladder, and supporting herself as she worked by entwining one muscular arm around one of the side ropes. She then produced a knife, and with a few rapid strokes severed the cords which bound their arms and feet; and now the pards had only to slip the former from under the rawhide noose in order to regain full use of their limbs. They still remained tied back to back, however; and from this difficulty there was apparently no relief.

"Now, pards," declared Wild Nell, in evident satisfaction at her neat handiwork, "t'other rope kin break as soon's it pleases, 'cause I reckon my trusty rawhide 'll hold ye safe enuff. Now, d'ye see, thar's only one way to reach the top. One o' ye must climb this ladder an' carry t'other on his back. See?"

"I comprehend," laughed Headlight Harry. "Owing to our peculiar position, one must do the climbing for both. Nothing could be easier, for the prospect of escape has transformed me into a veritable Ajax. I feel that I could carry a dozen men on my shoulders. But the ladder,—will it bear us all?"

"Don't worry 'bout the ladder, pard. It'd take a ton to break it. I've secured it at the top by puttin' a big rock on the end of it. Now, jest wait until I git to the top an' perhaps I kin give ye a lift with the lasso."

She nimbly scaled the ladder, and then the engineer began the ascent with his heavy burden. He found the task no easy one, and the ascent was slow and laborious; but steadily he mounted, round by round, while Wild Nell rendered very material aid by hauling away on the lasso, and at length he stood upon the rocky platform.

One stroke of the knife sufficed to sever the remaining rope which bound the pards together, and then, the lasso being removed, they stood free once more, scarcely able to comprehend their providential escape from death.

Filled with gratitude toward their beautiful preserver, the young railroaders advanced eagerly to grasp her hand.

"Wild Nell—" earnestly began Headlight Harry; but the mountain maid quickly cut his utterance short by an impatient gesture.

"Stop! There's no time for palaver," she exclaimed, nervously. "You must git away from hyar as quick's the law 'll allow, 'cause the gang's liable to come back any minnit. If they catch ye ag'in, I reckon they'll make quick work o' ye. So, take my advice, an' skip afore it's too late."

She was hastily rolling up the rope-ladder as she spoke, evidently anxious to escape herself from that dangerous locality.

"But, before we go," persisted the engineer, "at least explain how you became aware of our

sorry predicament, in time to rescue us so handily."

"Wal, then, seein' ye'r so inquisitive, I happened to overhear these fellers a-plannin' to capture ye. I was unable to warn ye in time to prevent this, so I kept a watch on their subsequent movements, hopin' to find a chance to set ye at liberty. I learned what they intended to do with ye, an' then went to work to circumvent 'em. You kin see how well I succeeded. I told ye, pards, I'd never forgit the good turn ye done me, an' I reckon I've kept my word."

"Noble girl! We can never repay the debt we owe you. But how happened it, may I ask, that you were enabled to overhear the plot of these scoundrels, and follow their movements so closely? In short, what are you doing here, in a region peopled by such lawless characters?"

A faint flush suffused Wild Nell's cheeks at these pointed questions, but it almost instantly disappeared.

"Pard, ye'r axin' somethin' now that I don't feel inclined to answer. In fact, it's none o' yer bizness," she retorted, coolly. "Now, if ye value my friendship an' yer own safety, don't ask any more questions, but jest streak it out o' hyar afore— Hark! Hyar they come, now!"

Sure enough, rough voices, plainly audible in the distance, told that the outlaw gang was already returning.

"Hyar, pard, take this—you'll probably need it! An' now be off! Take the trail to the right, an' scout for yer lives! Good-by!"

Headlight Harry mechanically grasped the revolver that Wild Nell thrust into his hand, and watched the nimble-footed mountain maid as she darted away like a startled fawn. In another moment he, too, was running for dear life, with Rufe Ruffle close at his heels.

Nor were they an instant too soon, for scarcely had they disappeared when the returning outlaws came leisurely upon the scene. The severed ropes and the utter absence of their late prisoners told the story of rescue as plainly as words; and, with angry cries, the gang rushed forward in pursuit of the fugitives, being well aware that the latter could escape only in one direction, and must even then be in the immediate vicinity.

Meantime, the Railroad Pard was toiling along the rugged mountain trail, straining every nerve to escape from their merciless foes; but, with every inch of their bodies stiff and sore from long hours of confinement, they were in no fit condition for such a contest, and within five minutes the fleet-footed pursuers were close at their heels.

Perceiving the uselessness of further flight, the young railroaders turned at bay, resolved to resist capture to the last. From his position behind a sheltering boulder, Headlight Harry promptly blazed away, and had the satisfaction of seeing his man bite the dust. Again he fired, and a second outlaw fell.

Unprepared for such a warm reception, the gang paused in momentary indecision, but the loud voice of the masked leader urged them on, and once more they rushed fiercely upon the brave defenders.

Crack!—crack!—crack! sounded the engineer's revolver, one report following another in swift succession; while Rufe Ruffle, lacking a better weapon, utilized the rocky fragments at his feet and transformed himself into a human catapult, showering the missiles upon his foes with terrific force and unerring aim.

One ruffian after another went down before this lively fusillade, but they still outnumbered the railroaders ten to one, and came on in an overwhelming body, unchecked by the storm of lead and rocky missiles.

But at this critical moment, when the last hope seemed gone, and speedy recapture threatened the Railroad Pard, there suddenly arose a mighty shout, and all were electrified to see the pass above filled with armed horsemen, with the giant figure of Big Hank Hawkins at their head.

"Hyar they are, boys! Hyar's the pesky varmints!" was his vociferous cry. "Sail into 'em, pards, an' give 'em Hail Columby!"

And then, like a thunderbolt, the Vigilantes swept through the narrow gorge, scattering the dismayed outlaws before them like chaff before the gale.

With his usual promptitude, the big chief of the Regulators had organized a strong party to effect the rescue of the Railroad Pard. This party, leaving Fortune City at daybreak, had spent several hours in fruitless search among the hills, and now the sound of firearms had brought them to the scene just in time to save their friends and put the enemy to rout.

Their victory was most complete, since the outlaws, taken wholly by surprise, were too demoralized to offer an effectual resistance. Their leader was one of the first to go down before the impetuous charge of the Vigilantes, while but a mere handful of his followers succeeded in escaping the terrible slaughter. The once powerful band, for months the terror of the community, was now practically annihilated; and, therefore, it was with feelings of elation that Big Hank's party returned to Fortune City.

The news of their great victory spread like wildfire, and caused universal rejoicing. There was a general curiosity to view the remains of the redoubtable outlaw chief; and the greatest surprise of the day occurred when that ruffian's mask was removed and his true identity revealed. It was the well-known face of Giant Tom, the miner, that met their astonished gaze—the father of Wild Nell, who had hitherto enjoyed the reputation of being an honest, law-abiding citizen, and whose connection with the outlaws had never been suspected.

None were more interested in this discovery than the Railroad Pard, since it served to elucidate all that had been obscure to them, and verified their suspicions that this mysterious wood-nymph was in some way connected with the mountain outlaws.

And Wild Nell—what of her?

The lone cabin was found deserted, and a vigorous search for miles around failed to reveal a trace of the outlaw's daughter. She had suddenly vanished from the scene, and her present whereabouts were clothed in impenetrable mystery.

The first regular coach that left for Satan's Camp after the events just narrated, numbered the Railroad Pard among its passengers. Once free from the perils that had beset them during their brief sojourn in Fortune City, the pards were anxious to reach the scene of their chosen labors, ere fresh difficulties arose to interrupt their plans. Already had valuable time been lost—enough, perhaps, to result in utter ruin to their scheme; and this fact made them doubly anxious to proceed at the earliest opportunity, which they did despite the strenuous objections of Big Hank, who bitterly lamented the loss of his new-found friends.

A large crowd was on hand to speed their departure, and the coach rolled away amid a chorus of cheers for the gallant young railroaders, which continued until the lumbering vehicle was lost to view.

The Railroad Pard was now fairly launched on the way to new scenes and adventures. The hidden gold bequeathed to Headlight Harry by the old miner was the ultimate goal of their ambition; and, ere this could be reached, there were cunning enemies to outwit and unknown perils to overcome.

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